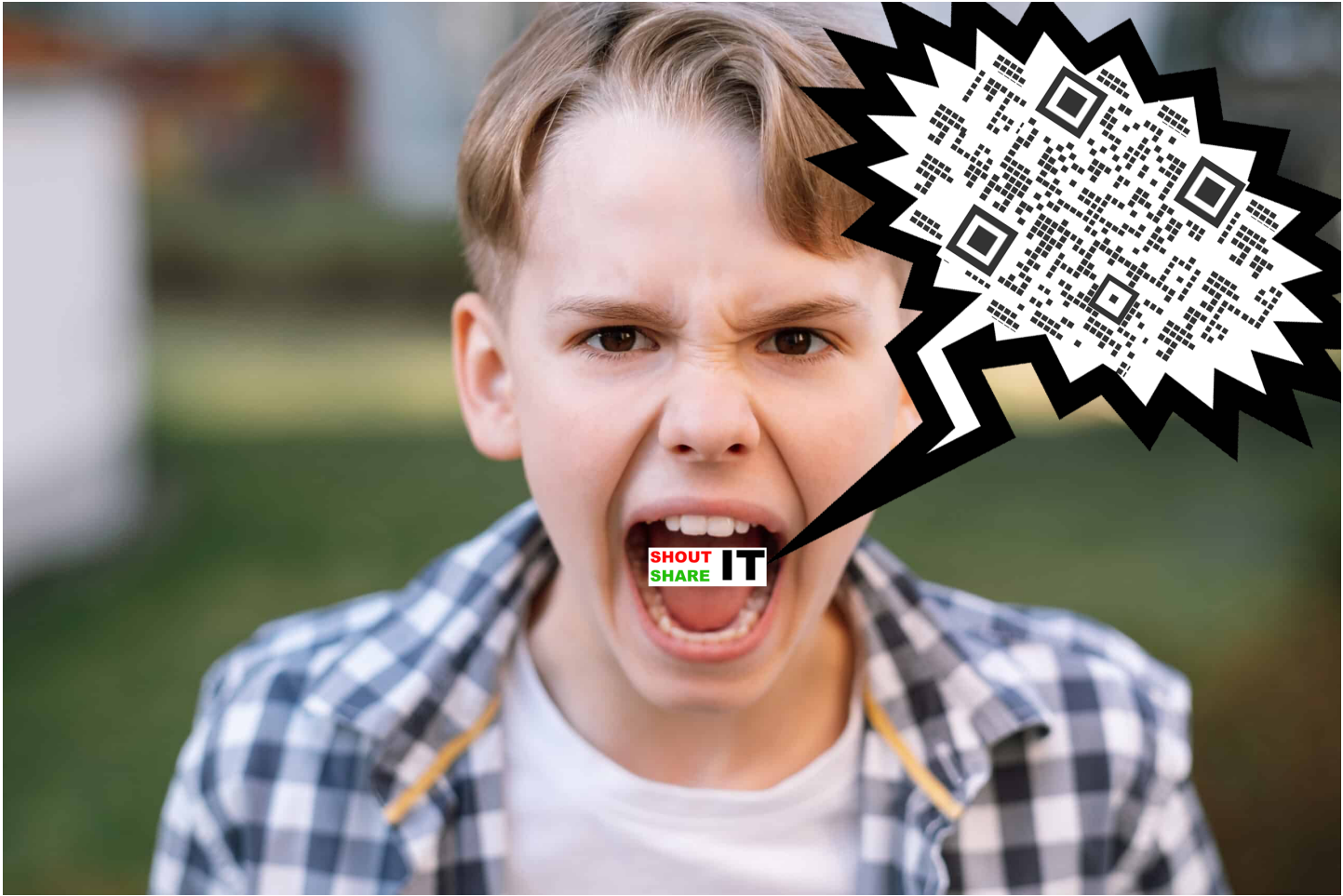






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AFRICAN THEATRE AND POLITICS

*the evolution of theatre in Ethiopia,
Tanzania and Zimbabwe*

a comparative study

Jane Plastow

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To my parents, Mary and Gerald Plastow

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This book is based on what those involved in theatre in Ethiopia, Tanzania and Zimbabwe have been able to tell me about their work. None of them, however, are responsible for any of the interpretations put upon the events recorded here, which are entirely my own. It is not possible to thank everyone concerned by name since the acknowledgements would have to extend over several pages. My major informants are listed in Annex A and I hope they will all accept my thanks for their invaluable assistance.

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MAP 1: Africa



MAP 2: Administrative regions of Ethiopia, 1994



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MAP 4: Provinces of Zimbabwe

INTRODUCTION

THE DECISION TO WRITE THIS BOOK was made after I had been working for several years in Africa, teaching and producing theatre. The longer I worked the more interested I became in the cultures I was encountering, yet there was relatively little written material about either traditional performance forms or the process of their evolution to the theatres of the present day. Since the information I wanted was not readily available I decided to research it myself.

First, this is a comparative study across three nations, Ethiopia, Tanzania and Zimbabwe. Until recently there has been a tendency to write about African arts as a homogeneous whole, whereas national and ethnic cultures are in reality enormously varied. In order to appreciate fully this point and to find out what, if any, similarities exist between performance cultures in different parts of the continent, I felt a comparative study of three nations would be the smallest number that would serve my purpose and the largest number I could analyse in depth.

Secondly, the book is based largely on field work. What information there is on African theatre is overwhelmingly literature-based. Scholars have generally studied only published texts, and then from a literary viewpoint rather than with regard to performance considerations. In the international field this involves only what has been written in English, French or Arabic. Published drama is only a fraction of theatre work currently taking place on the continent. Traditional African performance arts include a host of forms – dance, music, acrobatics and story-telling – not commonly incorporated in drama in the West. For this reason I have in this book differentiated between drama and theatre. I use the term “drama” only when referring to the predominantly dialogic performance form such as prevails in Europe, whilst theatre here incorporates the wider range of performance arts. In order to see what was happening in this wider field of theatre it was imperative to base my work on observations and interviews with theatre personnel in the countries concerned.

Thirdly, I wished to select countries where theatre was generally performed and published in vernacular languages. The countries I have chosen are not well known for their drama, because even their leading playwrights have chosen to write in the vernacular, and so have opted for popular national audiences rather than for the attention of international élites. In fact, the issue of language is not as clear as I at first supposed. African nations are seldom monolingual, and imperialists, both

European and African, have often used language as a means of censorship and control. A discussion about the uses and significance of language will be developed in the body of the text.

I was interested in the relationship of politics to theatre because I knew that reclaiming indigenous culture had been a major issue in several liberation struggles. This was relatively easy to ascertain and chronicle for the period of colonial dominance, but I was also interested in finding out about the relationship of theatre to political states in both pre-colonial and contemporary Africa.

The most significant intervention in the development of contemporary performance art in Africa was undoubtedly the introduction of European cultural forms. I set out to research the process of Western cultural invasion and to explore the way in which links between indigenous performance forms and Western drama had subsequently developed. This was a major factor in determining the countries I would study. Ethiopia was my starting point because I had worked there for several years and had become fascinated by the complexity of the constituent cultures in this nation which, alone in Africa, has never been colonised by Europeans.¹ I had visited Tanzania and Zimbabwe. I knew relatively little about their theatres, but I had enjoyed the time I spent in these countries and they fitted my criteria in that they produced work in vernacular languages and had experiences of colonialism to contrast with Ethiopia. Unusually in East Africa, Tanzania was governed for most of the colonial period under indirect rule.² This was a relatively light form of colonialism and presented a sharp contrast with Zimbabwe, which as Southern Rhodesia suffered under an intensely racist settler régime for ninety years. All three countries were introduced to Western drama in the late nineteenth or early twentieth century. I thought it would be of interest to examine the extent to which Western drama modified indigenous forms under such different régimes.

One other political factor affected my choice of countries. All three states selected were, at the time I began to study them, avowedly socialist.³ Their governments claimed actively to promote the arts, and ran arts programmes which were said to be popular and for the benefit of the masses. They had all publicly declared

¹ Ethiopia is an empire rather than a nation. The Amhara people who make up less than a quarter of the population have traditionally dominated over the other seventy or so ethnic groups; although this position has changed since 1991 when Eritrea seceded and the Tigrayan-dominated Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) took over the government.

² Indirect rule was a concept introduced by the British in West Africa. The idea was that in states not required by settlers (usually because the climate was considered unsuitable for Europeans), control would be maintained by a small number of whites via approved chiefs, who were then made responsible for the implementation of colonial policies.

³ Socialism in Africa is under stringent review following the collapse of the Soviet bloc, and capitalism is now a dominant force in the politics of all three countries discussed.

the importance of culture to socialist, nationalist development. I wanted to see how this rhetoric transposed into reality. I also wished to examine how theatre was used for politicising ends in the context of socialism, and to explore the relationships between state patronage and artistic freedom.

Finally, I chose these three nations because their theatres had been little studied. Theatre in Nigeria, South Africa and to a lesser extent in such countries as Egypt and Kenya is relatively well known and documented. No extensive work has been published on the theatre cultures of any of the countries I have selected. Very little has been written about Ethiopian theatre except for a few literary analyses of published plays. My M.Phil. thesis, "Ethiopia: The Creation of a Theatre Culture,"⁴ was the first comprehensive attempt to record the development of Ethiopian theatre. In Tanzania, research by staff and students in the Theatre Department of Dar es Salaam University provided a relative wealth of unpublished material, but it was mostly written in the context of the rather doctrinaire socialism in vogue at the University in the Seventies.⁵

In Zimbabwe, white amateur theatre history has been recorded in all its minutiae. By contrast, black performance art is only now beginning to be studied, although, since independence in 1980, as indigenous theatre has boomed, some articles have appeared concerning the evolution of the contemporary performance movement.⁶

Published material and even unpublished academic work could only provide the outline of what I wanted to know. The bulk of this book is based on information obtained through extensive interviews and through spending time observing theatre practitioners at work. Since most African theatre is performed by amateur community groups, producing devised or unpublished scripts, observation is the only way to begin to understand national theatre cultures. Moreover, it was only by living for some time in each of the countries concerned that I could begin to understand the

⁴ Jane Plastow, "Ethiopia: The Creation of a Theatre Culture," M.Phil thesis, Manchester University, 1989.

⁵ Most notable is the work of Ebrahim Hussein with his doctoral dissertation, "On the Development of Theatre in East Africa," Humboldt University, Berlin, 1974; Penina Muhando's "Tanzanian Traditional Theatre as a Pedagogical Institution: The Kaguru Theatre as a Case Study," doctoral dissertation, Dar es Salaam University, 1983; and in Amandina Lihamba's "Politics and Theatre in Tanzania after the Arusha Declaration 1967-1984," doctoral dissertation, Leeds University.

⁶ The most notable recent work in Zimbabwe has been Ranganai Zinyemba's *Zimbabwean Drama* (Gweru: Mambo, 1986), Preben Kaarsholm's paper "Mental Colonization or Catharsis?: Theatre, Democracy and Cultural Struggle from Rhodesia to Zimbabwe," given at the Institute of Commonwealth Studies, London, 1989; and articles by Stephen Chifunyise, Evie Globberman and Robert Kavanagh (also known as McLaren) in *Journal of Southern African Studies* 16.2 (Oxford, 1990):

context of their performance arts. Here I was in a unique position. Previous research comes largely either from foreign academics studying texts in isolation from the cultures in question or from indigenous experts writing about their own cultures from within.⁷ Both these approaches have limitations. The work of foreigners is often devoid of cultural context and examines only scripted drama. Indigenous writers have huge advantages of cultural understanding, but there have been problems when such writers extrapolate from one culture to make generalisations about others. Also, native writers may be so imbued with their cultures that they cannot observe in a detached manner and have little comparative base. This is not to denigrate the validity of either groups' work, but as a theatre practitioner who has been privileged to spend time in several African states I have worked out a different approach to that of other research I have found.

The use of primary sources for research purposes can lead to problems. Everywhere I have been, the majority of people have been enormously helpful. The more repressed a people are, the more I have found they wish to talk about their experiences. In Ethiopia, where people could not until very recently write openly for fear of reprisals, many interviewees poured out accounts of their theatre work and difficulties. In Zimbabwe, where researchers are more common and where race is still a factor affecting many people (and where I was less well known), it was slightly more difficult to obtain the interviews I wanted.

Interviewees have sometimes given me widely differing accounts of the same events. In some cases this is due to a different interpretation of the significance of an event, but often because of rivalries between practitioners or between practitioners and government officials. On other occasions discrepancies in accounts have arisen because time has affected informants' ability to recall events precisely. Such conflicting material has had to be assessed according to my own judgement and experience, which further scholarship is bound to find flawed in some respects. Where I have felt unsure about differences in accounts of events, I have included the discrepant versions rather than try to eliminate discordant material. Observation of work in progress has been equally important, not only to assess the plays performed, but also to begin to understand the how and why of theatrical performances and to gather information on audience reactions.

⁷ There are people who have written articles from a similar perspective to my own work. In Tanzania, Benjamin Leshoi, Joachim Fiebach and Mukotani Rugyendo were all expatriates who drew on their experiences in other African countries to set up the Theatre Department at Dar es Salaam University and wrote articles about how they wanted Tanzanian theatre to develop. Similarly in Zimbabwe, Kimani Gecau, Robert McLaren, Micere Mugo, Ngugi wa Mirii and the returned exile Stephen Chifunyise, have all drawn on experiences abroad to carry out both practical and written work. However, none of them has tried to analyse theatre development from pre-colonial times to the present day and none has written from a comparative viewpoint.

I make no claims as to the comprehensiveness, objectivity or definitive nature of this work. The countries described are ultimately typical only of themselves. Theatres in West or Northern Africa would be informed by very different cultural backgrounds, as would those with a French or Portuguese experience of colonialism. My comparisons point to certain areas of commonalty as well as to divergent national traits, but I do not believe one can extrapolate theories about African culture in general from my work. On the contrary, I have wished to demonstrate how national experiences have profoundly affected the individual development of national theatres.

My information base is necessarily limited. Cultures in Africa have always been dynamic, as much before the period of European colonisation as afterwards, because societies were always in a state of flux. There is little material available on pre-colonial cultures. The Ethiopians and the Tanzanian Swahilis did use written forms prior to the arrival of Europeans, but writing was a minority skill and little was recorded about performance art. Modern scholars have tended to write about traditional arts as though these had remained unchanged for aeons prior to the arrival of the white man. I am therefore aware that my material on pre-colonial art forms is limited and subject to my own interpretations. In studying contemporary theatres I could visit only a selection of theatre groups and could only interview what I hope is still a representative sample of those involved with theatre work. This need to be selective means that there are inevitably gaps in my knowledge. Moreover, since it is easier to gain access to information on drama, which is usually taken more seriously by writers and the authorities than are traditional forms, I am aware that this research is stronger in the area of dialogue-dominated theatre.

The very paucity of material on the theatres of Ethiopia, Tanzania and Zimbabwe has given me unusual freedom in the way I have researched and written this book. As my research progressed I became more and more interested in the often very direct links between theatre and politics. I have now come to think that this linkage is seminal in understanding theatre in all three countries studied. This is certainly true in the modern era, and was probably also the case in pre-colonial times, because art forms and artists vary considerably from communalist to feudal states and reflect the changing needs of the leaders of those societies. I found that in pre-colonial states art was often used to comment on the state. Where professional performers existed they were closely linked to the ruling classes on whose patronage they depended, but whom they also frequently criticised, acting as a conduit of public opinion.

Later, the way in which European colonisers sought first to expunge traditional arts and then to turn them into meaningless entertainments whilst promoting Western theatre amongst black élites is a fine example of cultural invasion. This invasion was repelled, as was colonialism itself, by a growing militancy, cultural as well as

physical. In Tanganyika, Julius Nyerere's tool of cultural unification was the Kiswahili language, which the nationalists promoted until it became a symbol of a united nation's determination to be rid of the British. In Ethiopia and Zimbabwe, theatre played a considerable role in politicisation and, by extension, in the overthrow of imperialist régimes.

In the modern independent states considered here the role of theatre continues to be overtly political. The new states have promoted the arts but have expected them to laud the government. This policy worked in Ethiopia and Tanzania in relation to the peasantry, but it has notably failed in Zimbabwe. This is because in the first two countries political struggle and theatre were both dominated by small aristocratic or Western-educated élites.⁸ However, in Zimbabwe, where the independence struggle was fought by the peasantry, the cultural weapon remains a tool of the people. In all three nations the artistic élite has come into conflict with the state. One has to recognise the fact that until very recently only a tiny minority of Africans had access to higher education. This minority formed both the cultural and the political leadership, and the members of the two groups often known to each other, personally or by repute. During independence and revolutionary struggles leading artists and liberation cadres worked closely together. Indeed the politicians often took active roles in cultural activities.⁹ In all three nations examined here a proportion of the cultural leadership has steadfastly supported the state and thereby tended to move towards a bureaucratic rather than an artistic milieu. However, after an initial period of support, varying from a matter of months to ten or more years, leading playwrights and performers have all become to a greater or lesser degree critical of what they see as the betrayal by the leadership of their original socialist mandate. Governments for their part have greatly resented such criticism and in countries where the media are largely state controlled have tried to ignore, discredit or silence critical voices in the theatres. Certainly governments in all three nations have ceased to pay more than the merest lip service to any idea that culture might have a dynamic rôle to play in the development process.

It is the importance of theatre in the political process which makes it such an exciting form to study in Africa. Artists in all the countries I have visited believe they have a duty to express their political opinions and to voice their opposition to repression and betrayal of the people by the state. On numerous occasions the theatre has been enormously influential. Moreover, a study of the history of theatre move-

⁸ In Ethiopia this was true only until the successful revolts in the north which led to the overthrow of Mengistu Haile-Mariam's government in May 1991.

⁹ In Zimbabwe during the liberation struggle it was common for leading ZAPU and ZANU cadres to take part in theatre, both in the training and refugee camps in exile and at politicising sessions for the peasantry within Zimbabwe. In Tanzania, Julius Nyerere has translated Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* and *The Merchant of Venice* into Kiswahili.

ments is a previously unregarded but, I think, valid and interesting way of studying politics and political freedoms in African countries.¹⁰ My analysis of this inter-relationship is, of course, open to question, and is heavily influenced by my own artistic and political perspectives, which I have made no attempt to disguise. Ultimately my assessment makes bleak reading, in that everywhere artistic freedoms are being restricted by governments resistant to either popular or intellectual criticism and afraid of allowing independent voices of dissent. However, history demonstrates that insofar as artists are leaders of, and mouthpieces for, popular opinion they cannot be stifled indefinitely. Either governments will have to allow people and people's arts into discussion on the way forward or, like their predecessors, they risk being overthrown.



¹⁰ Other people have written about political theatre, especially in South Africa. This is not the same as writing about the relationship between theatre and political establishments. In the countries I am considering, writers such as Lihamba, Chifunyise and McLaren all go some way along the path of my own analysis. However, they are constrained to varying degrees of self-censorship by the fact that they live in the societies they are criticising. Moreover, none of their work is as extensive as my own, nor does it link political developments so directly with theatre.

1

THE PRE-COLONIAL THEATRE¹

THIS CHAPTER ALONE will avoid individual study of the three modern states under consideration. This is because, with the arguable exception of the Ethiopians, the peoples who later became incorporated into the nations we now recognise as Tanzania, Zimbabwe and Ethiopia identified themselves according to radically different concepts of nationality from those imposed by the European colonisation of Africa in the late nineteenth century. Instead, I will look at pre-colonial societies in the light of their wide-ranging forms of social organisation, and will try to draw some provisional conclusions about the differing functions of performance cultures in societies which ranged from the loose-knit and egalitarian structures of such peoples as the Zanaki or the Iraqw of present-day Tanzania and the Oromo or Majengo of Ethiopia, through to the hierarchical nation-states of the Ethiopian Amhara imperialists and the various Shona empires which in turn held power from the thirteenth to mid-nineteenth century in Zimbabwe.

The chapter will seek to demonstrate that in all pre-colonial societies examined performance cultures appear to have fulfilled both ritual and didactic functions as well as serving the need for entertainment. It will also be argued that the development of performance forms was closely related to political evolution in the societies concerned.

In many cases conclusions will be provisional, for lack of comprehensive data. Of the peoples concerned here only the highland Ethiopians, the Amharas, Tigreans and Tigres and the Swahilis of coastal Tanzania were literate before the coming of colonialism. For other sources of written information prior to the late nineteenth

¹ The general historical sources on the pre-colonial period I have used most commonly are: for Ethiopia, Sergew Hable Sallasie's *Ancient and Medieval Ethiopian History to 1270* (Addis Ababa: United Printers, 1972) and Mordechai Abir's two books, *Ethiopia: The Era of the Princes* (London: Longman, 1968) and *Ethiopia and the Red Sea* (London: Frank Cass, 1980); for Zimbabwe, D.N. Beach's studies, *The Shona and Zimbabwe 900-1850* (Gweru: Mambo, 1980) and *War and Politics in Zimbabwe 1840-1900* (Gweru: Mambo, 1986); and for Tanzania, John Iliffe's *A Modern History of Tanganyika* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1979)

century the researcher has to rely on the often highly coloured and culturally prejudiced writings of a motley selection of European and Arab travellers and traders. These date back to a first-century-A.D. guide book to the Red Sea area, *The Periplus of the Erythraean Sea*, produced by a Greek shipmaster, but studies became more widely available only after the Portuguese began their penetration of the East African littoral in the late fifteenth century.²

When the European invasion of the African continent took place in the late nineteenth century, the last thing that concerned most colonists was an investigation into local cultures. One of the main philosophical justifications for African colonisation was that the continent as a whole was utterly barbarous and without culture. The European mission was to bring civilisation and Christianity to a benighted Africa. Traditional rituals and celebrations inspired fear in the uncomprehending Europeans, who often saw in them potential inspirations for revolt or manifestations of the animism they wished to eradicate. They therefore routinely sought to suppress many forms of traditional African culture.

In more recent years, notably in the post-colonial period, anthropologists, ethnomusicologists and theatre specialists have started to carry out investigations into traditional performance forms. Such studies have been by no means comprehensive. For example, in Ethiopia the culture of the dominant Amharas has been the subject of considerable research, but otherwise, apart from the collection of traditional dances by professional "kinet"³ groups, the only specific examination of performance forms amongst the mass of Ethiopia's over seventy ethnic groups has been a handful of undergraduate dissertations by students of theatre at Addis Ababa University and a preliminary investigation of four extreme-western peoples, the Anuak, Majengo, Nuer and Shako, by Peter Harrop and Aboneh Ashegrie.⁴

The "ujamaa"⁵ philosophy promoted by President Julius Nyerere in Tanzania from 1967 onwards specifically advocated looking to traditional roots on which to

² Vasco da Gama reached Mombasa in present-day Kenya in 1498 and began a process of pillage by Europeans which devastated the previously prosperous Swahili economy. However, the Portuguese reached the Shona region only in the early sixteenth century.

³ Kinet literally means art or culture in Amharinya, but the term has been commonly appropriated to describe dance-drama.

⁴ For further information, see Amare Berta, *Ethiopian Traditional Drama*, senior paper (Addis Ababa University: Theatre Arts Department, 1982); Teclehaimanot Gebre Selassie, *A Brief Study of the Azmaris in Addis Ababa* (Addis Ababa Symposium, vol. 2; Addis Ababa, 1986), and Peter Harrop & Aboneh Ashegrie, *A Preliminary Investigation of Dramatic Elements within Traditional Ceremonies among the Anuak, Mejengo, Nuer and Shako Nationalities of Illubabor Administrative Region* (Addis Ababa: Addis Ababa UP, 1984).

⁵ Ujamaa is the form of socialism advocated by Julius Nyerere. It translates roughly as familyhood, and looks back to pre-colonial communalism as a basis on which to build a modern egalitarian state.

build a self-reliant nation. This philosophy undoubtedly stimulated research into traditional performance forms by students and staff in the Department of Theatre, Music and Art at the University of Dar es Salaam. Some in-depth work has been produced, most notably by Penina Mlama, who chose to examine the traditional theatre forms of her native Kaguru people for both her M.A. and Ph.D. theses.⁶ However, Tanzania has over 120 ethnic groups, many of which remain without any detailed cultural study at the time of writing.

Zimbabwe has only two major ethnic groups, the Shona and the Ndebele, although there are several fringe peoples on the nation's borders. The numerically superior Shona have been the subject of many publications, although much of their ancient history is still a matter of conjecture as they had no written literature and no strong tradition of oral historians on whom researchers could draw.⁷ The Ndebele have been studied less, but have a relatively short history since they only came into being in the nineteenth century after a split with their South African parent tribe, the Zulu.⁸ Studies emanating from the University of Zimbabwe Department of African Languages and Literature have started to examine Shona and Ndebele performance cultures only in the last few years.⁹ Difficulties with this work are great in Zimbabwe because the white settler state which existed up until 1980 effectively wiped out many indigenous cultural practices and made them a matter of almost purely historical interest.

Because the performance forms of traditional Africa are still struggling to be recognised as a legitimate theatre-arts category, they have attracted commensurably little funding or interest. Colleges and centres for the study of ethnomusicology and

⁶ See P.O. Mlama, "The Role of Music in African Traditional Society," M.A. thesis, University of Dar es Salaam, 1978 and Penina Mlama, "Tanzanian Traditional Theatre as a Pedagogical Institution: The Kaguru Theatre as a Case Study," doctoral dissertation, University of Dar es Salaam, 1983.

⁷ See D.N. Beach's studies (1980, 1986); M.F.C. Boudillon, *The Shona Peoples* (Gwelo: Mambo, 1976); Michael Gelfand, *Growing up in Shona Society* (Gwelo: Mambo, 1979), and Herbert Aschwendt, *Symbols of Life* (Gwelo: Mambo, 1976).

⁸ I have been unable to find much research into Ndebele culture. The exceptions are the Rev. W. Bozongwana, *Ndebele Religion and Customs* (Gweru: Mambo, 1983) and Lizwe Nkala, "Indigenous Forms of Drama in Traditional Ndebele and Zulu Societies and the extent to which they have influenced contemporary dramatic performance in these societies," B.A. thesis, Department of African Languages and Literature, University of Zimbabwe, 1989. It seems apparent that Ndebele culture at first closely mirrored that of the Zulus, but was later profoundly influenced by Shona society.

⁹ For further theatrical information on the Ndebele and Shona see Lizwe Nkala, "The Indigenous Forms of Drama in Traditional Ndebele and Zulu Societies"; Silas T. Taviringana, "The Traditional Element in Some Written Shona Plays," B.A. thesis, Department of African Languages and Literature, University of Zimbabwe, 1986; and Ndiaziveyi Mutisi, "Dramatic Performances in Shona," B.A. thesis, Department of African Languages and Literature, University of Zimbabwe, 1985.

art are now increasingly common in African countries, but of the three nations considered here only Tanzania maintains a practical training centre in performance skills, at the Bagamoyo College of Arts (see Figs. 15–17). This low level of support for the study of theatre relates to a general lack of credence given to the idea that traditional performance arts are a legitimate theatre form, largely because they do not correlate directly with Western perceptions of what constitutes drama. This chapter will argue that such forms are an important theatrical heritage, which require research and understanding if contemporary drama is to seek to be meaningful and relevant to the mass of African peoples.

With a certain degree of diffidence I believe it is now necessary to enter, at least briefly, into the argument as to whether traditional African performance forms can be designated part of a wider, world theatre. My trepidation exists because this discussion has been on-going since the Sixties, and many eminent theatre practitioners and theoreticians have argued both for and against the contention that Africa has an indigenous theatre tradition.¹⁰

The main argument of the conservatives such as Taban lo Liyong and Robert Serumanga is that theatre in the pre-colonial era did not fulfil such “essential” criteria as having the audience and performers clearly separated, a specific stage area, and professional performers, and that performances had a largely ritual function, whereas legitimate theatre is secular and should be conceived of primarily as a form of entertainment. There are numerous other stipulations which have been made from time to time, but what all of them have in common is that they posit the nineteenth-century European drama of the well-made play as a benchmark, and their arguments usually centre on the issue of just how far from this “ideal” a performance tradition should be allowed to depart before it passes some imaginary boundary and can no longer be admitted within the designation of theatre.

I believe that such thinking reflects merely the level of neo-colonial indoctrination still harboured by many African theatre workers and intellectuals. It is obvious that the definition of theatre commonly advocated is simply that which pertained to Europe at the time of the colonisation of the African continent. This definition became outmoded almost from the time of its inception, for Europe rapidly moved on to experiment with forms such as surrealism, absurdism, “total” theatre, whilst

¹⁰ The list of those who have taken part in this debate is considerable. Some of the most influential have been Wole Soyinka, J.A. Adedeji, Ngugi wa Thiong’o, Taban lo Liyong and Robert Serumanga. From the countries directly concerned in this study the most vocal debaters, all to various degrees radical in their outlook on the role of African theatre, are Tsegaye Gebre-Medhin and Mengistu Lemma of Ethiopia; Ebrahim Hussein, Amandina Lihamba, Penina Mlama, Joachim Fiebach and Bob Leshoai writing from Tanzania; and T.K. Tsodzo and Stephen Chifunyise of Zimbabwe.

leaving Africa in the grip of ideas of naturalistic production imported from the world of British amateur dramatics.

Even those intellectuals who have sought to defend African performance forms have often done so simply by trying to widen the colonial definition sufficiently for African forms to squeeze in on the very edges of the theatre world. All such arguments are the result of colonial and neo-colonial cultural imperialist indoctrination. I am strongly of the opinion that African performance forms do not need to justify their existence. They simply are, and should be placed in a central position in all discussions of African theatre, much as many post-colonial "English" departments have now centralised the position of the African writer who works in the English language. We will then feel free to draw on these forms as desired and incorporate them into contemporary productions without any inhibiting sense of intrinsic inferiority.

The one area which needs rather more serious consideration is the contention that African traditional performance is based on religious ritual and therefore is not a part of theatre. If religion is seen as fulfilling a different function from theatre because the audience perceive such activities as a part of worship rather than entertainment, religious rituals, however dramatic they may be, cannot be designated "theatre" in quite the same way as secular performances.

There is a problem, in that it is at times difficult to decide where a performance crosses the boundary between religious worship and public entertainment. This is particularly true in modern times, as the introduction of Christianity and Islam to many animist areas undermined total faith in the old rites. Jacqueline Hartmann has carried out an extensive study of the masked dancers of WaMakonde, a people who originate from southern Tanzania and northern Mozambique. She particularly studied the "*Lipiko*" masked dance which was traditionally used in connection with initiation rites. Her thesis argues that in this dance there is a high degree of "theatre" or entertainment value over ritual content, but she expresses the ambiguity which many have commented on in drawing a line between ritual and theatre:

One cannot [...] draw up a list of objective criteria by which to judge whether a performance is ritual or drama. It is the total context of the performance, and the way in which it conditions the participants (both performers and spectators) that is the most important factor of all – the ultimate distinction lies in the attitudes of the performers and spectators.¹¹

Makonde masked dancers perform at initiation rites representing spirits and confirming the sacred relationship between the living and the spirits of ancestors. Just

¹¹ J. Hartman, "Masquerade Amongst the WaMokonde in Tanzania: A Study of Traditional and Non-Traditional Performances as Theatre," B.A. thesis, Department of Theatre, University of Dar es Salaam, 1986: 67.

how much the dancers are believed to be, or believe themselves to be, temporarily invested with a spirit nature or are simply dancers representing that spirit seems to depend on how tied the performers and audience remain to a traditional Makonde religious world-view. As in many religious rituals, such as the Catholic versus Protestant dispute over the process of transubstantiation during the mass, the degree of transformation of masked dancer to spirit would seem to be open to differing opinions.

It is particularly difficult to assess the attitudes of animist peoples to theatrical elements in religious rituals because of an acute lack of data. Ethnographic studies have frequently documented the role of ritual in African religious ceremonies, but the anthropologists who carried out these studies have not sought to investigate how far ritual is appreciated as performance as well as, or separate from, the religious experience involved. The theatre researcher is therefore forced to extrapolate from descriptions of such rituals, plus contemporary personal experiences, to determine how important and how recognised theatrical elements may be. I would argue with Hartmann's analysis, insofar as it seems to me that, as in so many areas of communalist societies, it was not seen to be necessary to differentiate explicitly among the multiple functions of religious rituals.

Compartmentalisation of areas of life experience, as I will argue below, appears to be a function of larger and more complex societies. Whereas a feudal state might seek to deny the aesthetic or entertainment value of a religious ritual, however theatrical its parts, or to subsume those elements into an entirely spiritual experience in order to differentiate between the religious and the secular, the integrated organisation of small communalist units militates against such divisive attitudes. African theatre theorists such as the Tanzanians Amandina Lihamba and Penina Mlama¹² stress the didactic and functional nature of traditional African performance art in communalist societies, and this seems to me a key to understanding attitudes to religious ritual. If work, religion and pleasure were not seen as the separate entities they so often are in the contemporary Western world, then it would appear likely that a religious ritual might consciously encompass a theatrical experience, and that the two strands to the ritual might coexist without either needing to assert its claims to the denigration of the other. The high value placed on an "*n'ganga*" (traditional healer and spiritual leader) who was particularly accomplished in organising ritual performances, on a virtuoso spirit dancer or an original teller of the myths which feature so largely in African oral tradition and straddle the divide between secular

¹² Amandina Lihamba and Penina Mlama (also known as Penina Muhando or Muhando-Mlama) are both professors of theatre at the University of Dar es Salaam, and leading theatre practitioners and playwrights. As women they are highly unusual in the African theatre world, where men normally dominate the performance arts.

story and religious lore, seems to me to indicate that religious rituals could be and were appreciated as theatre at the same time as they catered to spiritual needs.

It is also important here to note that religious ritual does not encompass all traditional African performance arts. The part played by ritual in African performance forms, while undoubtedly important, may at times have been over-emphasised. In Ethiopia there has long existed a caste group, the “*azmaris*,” who function as full-time musicians and entertainers, yet, in a traditionally heavily religious Christian society, their function has always been one of secular entertainment.¹³ Similarly, travellers told of “jesters” at the courts of the Mutapa kings of fifteenth-century Zimbabwe.¹⁴ Apart from such “professional” entertainers, the story-teller – and story-telling in societies I have researched often includes extensive use of theatrical devices such as gesture and the assumption of a range of voices – is a greatly honoured figure. Praise-poems and heroic recitation are common dramatic secular forms, and even the area of dance-drama, so commonly equated with ritual, is by no means exclusively religiously oriented.

The tendency to equate African performance forms exclusively with religious ritual is, I think, possibly a subtle and even, at times, an unconscious way of categorising African theatre as primitive. The received wisdom is that theatre originated in religious ritual and then developed out of it. This argument is usually based on the evolution of ancient Greek drama and of the mystery plays of medieval Europe. I have now lost count of the number of times I have seen Phyllis Hartnoll’s account of this process in the *Oxford Companion to the Theatre* quoted by African students as virtual holy writ.¹⁵ The corollary of such an argument is that if traditional African performance forms are indeed largely based on religious ritual, then African theatre and, by implication, Africans themselves are primitive, and their culture, as the colonialists believed, is less developed and inferior to that of the West.

Although far less publicised, there is, however, an alternative view on the origins of drama. Some socialists and Marxists argue that drama grew out of labour. In the countries I have researched several leading practitioners and theorists hold this view. Lihamba argues that:

The simplicity of oral art forms which depend on visual and audio-visual media is a reflection of the simplicity of the hand tool used in production. All labour, which is creative, catering to the material and non-material needs, depends on the living human being. Performances of a theatrical nature become closely intertwined with each other because of the communication structure which relies on man. Where pre-capitalist

¹³ The *azmaris*, like all manual labourers and craftsmen other than farmers, have traditionally been looked down on by the highland Ethiopians. Yet at the same time their services are greatly valued for celebrations and festivities.

¹⁴ See A.C. Hodza & George Fortune, *Shona Praise Poetry* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1979): 4.

¹⁵ *Oxford Companion to the Theatre*, ed. Phyllis Hartnoll (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1972): 403.

formations still exist the permeation of performances in other activities of man still lingers. This is because art, though a higher type of labour, is indistinguishable from other forms of labour. Creative labour becomes a manifestation of the practical activity of man by virtue of which he expresses and confirms himself in the objective world as a social and creative being.¹⁶

If we are able to break out of the straitjacket of a classical inheritance in viewing this matter it seems quite possible that labour and not religion was, in some cases at least, the midwife of theatre. Performances to do with the agricultural cycle, courtship and marriage, as I will detail below, were often associated in one area with religion and in another with secular celebrations. To argue about the primacy of spiritual or labour needs seems to me a chicken-and-egg situation. Both manifest themselves in many times and places. Pre-colonial societies commonly have evidence of work-related song and dance, particularly in the area of communal labour as well as of theatrical religious rituals. However, if we can do away with the myth that African performance forms are almost exclusively based on religious ritual it may help us to break with the entire hold of colonial thought which sought to marginalise and denigrate pre-colonial African performance forms; we can thereby give them back their rightful, central role in any discussion of theatre in Africa.

The whole debate on the place of traditional African theatre forms would be of relatively little importance if these arts had become mere historical relics. The prime purpose of research by contemporary theatre practitioners, as opposed to anthropologists or historians, into traditional performance forms must be in order to understand how they can be used within modern productions, both to assert cultural continuity in the face of the massive colonial and neo-colonial artistic influences which have so often been in danger of marginalising African culture to the point of no return, and to create a contemporary theatre which is meaningful and of direct relevance to the mass of African peoples who retain a largely rural life-style with strong affiliations to traditional forms of cultural expression.

The intellectual community of African theatre practitioners, which has largely been responsible for experimentation with the integration of Western and traditional forms, has in recent years become acutely aware of the possibility that their élite group is in grave danger of being assimilated by Western cultural imperialism to such a degree that they can no longer identify in any meaningful way with the mass of the peasantry. If such a fate is to be avoided, it becomes imperative to combat the continuous bombardment of cultural forms extolling purely Western values with a modern theatre which draws on the immense neglected *richesse* of traditional performance forms. In all the countries I am discussing the majority of modern playwrights and dramaturges are convinced socialists and nationalists who would wish

¹⁶ Amandina Lihamba, "The Performing Arts and Development," *Utafiti* (Dar es Salaam) 7.1 (1985): 31.

their productions to be of relevance to the mass of the people, and to act as a voice for the peasantry and proletariat. It is, however, questionable whether the aim of unity between the artistic intellectuals and the people as a whole is a realistic possibility. Prolonged liberation struggles such as that experienced by Zimbabwe do appear to have forged the basis for a truly popular theatre utilising traditional music, instruments and dance along with modern ideas of agit prop and campaigning drama where intellectuals and workers' groups can perform together successfully. This situation is the exception rather than the rule. In Ethiopia traditional cultural forms are still a part of the fabric of rural life, but intellectual drama remains confined to the cities and largely to the professional theatres. This drama has had a significant impact on the course of Ethiopian political development, but this was because change in Ethiopia has until recently come about only as the result of power struggles between urban élites, to which the mass of the peasantry and their forms of cultural production were largely irrelevant. Ironically, it is the Tanzanian intellectual playwrights who have been most vocal in promoting nationalist popular theatre, yet, in part at least because the intellectuals refuse to accept the reality of the gulf between themselves and the peasantry, their work has neither penetrated into the country or been seen as other than an alien élite form by most of those who have encountered modern Tanzanian plays.

The struggle is certainly not simply to resurrect archaic forms intact. As Ngugi wa Thiong'o has argued, there is a danger of misperceiving of the place of traditional art forms in contemporary society:

There are people, honest people, who confuse culture with irrelevant traditionalism; it is surely not possible to lift traditional structure and cultures intact into modern Africa. A meaningful culture is the one born out of the present hopes and especially the hopes of an impoverished peasantry, and that of the growing body of urban workers.¹⁷

Liberation struggles in Ngugi's own Kenya, and in the countries with which I am concerned here, have given great impetus to the search for a way to create national cultures which both look back to the positive among traditional forms and seek to discard the irrelevant clutter of Western imperialist and consumerist cultural impositions.

Regrettably, once installed, post-colonial and revolutionary governments have too often forgotten the lessons of struggle and have either promoted the imitative Western theatre forms of their own schooldays or simply lifted traditional dance-drama into the sanitised arena of "airport culture,"¹⁸ where dancers are required to

¹⁷ Ngugi wa Thiong'o, *Homecoming: Essays on African and Caribbean Literature, Culture and Politics* (London: Heinemann, 1972): 12.

¹⁸ "Airport culture" is a delightfully descriptive term I have borrowed from Tanzanian theatre practitioners. It refers to the habit of many African leaders of demanding, often at very short notice,

tout their cultural heritage in a degraded form for the benefit of foreign tourists or to entertain visiting dignitaries.

The performance forms

In considering the performance forms of traditional African societies – dance, music, song, drama, story-telling, dramatic poetry and related literature – it is important to recognise not only that categories frequently overlap, but also that different kinds of states used different kinds of performance forms, or even similar performance forms, for different purposes.

An idealised view is frequently expressed that pre-colonial art forms were all communalist and integrationist. This view has been particularly strongly espoused in Tanzania, where it coincides with the official policy of *ujamaa*, and is here expressed by Benjamin Leshoi, a South African who worked for several years in the Seventies in the Department of Theatre at Dar es Salaam University:

Whereas in the Western world drama, poetry, story, music and dance have been separated and compartmentalised into tight and individual disciplines, the African drama integrates or combines them all into one unit very difficult to compartmentalise.¹⁹

I would argue that this view takes into account only certain societies and certain forms of art. The Tanzanian experience, with the significant exception of certain Swahili forms, does seem to be frequently integrationist, but this is largely a function of the lack of major nation-states in the region prior to colonialism. As I will demonstrate below, it seems plain that the more complex a state becomes the more theatre forms fragment, with specialist artists appearing to serve increasingly differentiated class, craft and caste interests.

Too often, Africanist theatre researchers have extrapolated findings from one area and applied them wholesale to a continent which contained a multitude of forms of social organisation and cultural expression. This has been particularly the case with West African, and specifically Nigerian, writers such as Wole Soyinka, J.A. Adedeji and Ola Rotimi who, largely because they were the first group to carry out extensive research into indigenous theatre forms, were able to present a West Africanist view of the continent's performance art largely uncontested by other theorists.²⁰

that performers, usually traditional dancers, go to airports to give displays to arriving dignitaries. In a wider context the term refers to the attitude of the authorities to indigenous culture, and their tendency to utilise it as quaint and exotic but to lack any serious commitment to developing relevant contemporary performance forms.

¹⁹ Benjamin L. Leshoi, "Drama as a Means of Education in Africa," doctoral dissertation, University of Dar es Salaam, 1978: 22.

²⁰ Nigeria has a particularly rich contemporary theatre, with a continuing strong influence from traditional religion, ritual and related performance forms. However, indirect colonial rule gave rise

I also suspect that it has been politically expedient for many writers to accept the view that pre-colonial performance forms expressed an egalitarian and integrated cultural experience, because this can be put in the balance against the compartmentalisation and marginalisation of the arts experienced under colonial rule and often carried forward into the post-colonial era. In recent years African theatre writers have begun to point out that communalist performance forms were not always entirely wonderful. The teachings such traditional forms gave, whilst reconciling man to his environment and society, tended to impose conformist messages and often reinforced reactionary beliefs. This is a generalisation, but the tendency is especially clear in the way in which traditional performance arts often differentiated between male and female roles, with women cast as the inferior partners. For example, in most dances I have encountered, male and female roles are sharply divided, dances are usually led by men, and women tend to be portrayed either as sexual objects or home-makers while the males have a range of more flamboyant roles often related to warrior prowess. In many traditional societies all musicians were male, and although both men and women acted as story-tellers I have found a plethora of tales about wicked and untrustworthy women who ill-treat their menfolk, whilst I can think of none concerning male betrayal of womankind. There are few instances of women working as professional performers in pre-colonial society. The female *azmaris* of Ethiopia were one such group, but although their skills were in great demand they were individually scorned as immodest women.²¹ To perform is inevitably to attract a degree of attention to oneself, and in most pre-colonial societies the ideal woman was quiet and demure. Within the village context women played an essential role in communal dances and women-only rituals, but to single themselves out for the attention that went with being a musician, poet or specialist performer was to challenge the accepted values and to invite suggestions that one was of easy virtue. In the view of traditional patriarchy, a woman could only be seeking the public eye in order to gain the sexual attention and patronage of men.

Performance art in pre-colonial Africa might be critical of individuals, as court poets and praise-singers often were, but this was because the subjects of such songs and poems were deemed to have transgressed their accepted roles. Generally these theatre forms celebrated the status quo. It would take the introduction of European-style drama with its central concept of conflict, plus resentment at European suppression of African performance arts, before theatre in Africa became a radical tool of consciousness-raising.

to particular conditions which have by no means been paralleled everywhere else in Africa. The circumstances prevailing in independent Christian Ethiopia or racist Zimbabwe, for example, produced profoundly different cultural manifestations.

²¹ Female *azmaris* were generally singers, but some also played the *masinko*, a form of one-string violin common in highland Ethiopia.

Few writers appear to have confronted the reality that different parts of Africa contained radically different cultural manifestations, and that in the great empires of pre-colonial history these were by no means all egalitarian. To look at pre-colonial Africa as a largely undifferentiated, culturally homogeneous unit seems to me a reductionist view to be discouraged. It implies an acquiescence in the beliefs of the most insensitive colonists that the continent, prior to the arrival of the white man, was populated by a mass of equally savage peoples. Are we to counteract this argument purely with the contention that Africa was home to one mass folk-culture? To start to do justice to performance forms on the continent it is imperative to begin by examining individual national and ethnic forms in order to understand how and why they evolved differently. In the following discussion of the various traditional performance forms I hope to show that, while smaller communalist societies did have generally integrated performance traditions, the more hierarchical feudal states contained both integrated forms and more specialist categories of art and artists which generally served the interests of élite society as represented by the church and state.

Even in the most integrated communalist societies not everybody could be included in all cultural activities. The most basic differentiation practised continent-wide was between the sexes. There is evidence of early matriarchal states in Africa, but these have largely disappeared, although matrilineal inheritance remains a feature of several ethnic groups. More commonly, women are seen as the inferior appendages of their men, and where they do have status it is often only through patrilineal affiliations, as amongst the Shona, where patrilineal aunts have superior status to those on the maternal side. As artists, unless the performance was a women-only concern, female roles were usually subordinate to those of the men.

The second most common division was between the elders and the mass of the people. Communalist societies tend to show great respect for elders, who are seen as repositories of wisdom and the natural governors of the village or tribe. In artistic terms this often meant that it was the old people who were the masters of storytelling and of oral poetry and history. Their accumulated knowledge meant that they possessed the widest range of stories and knew most about the forms of poetry and the lessons that these should be used to teach. In more hierarchical societies rank might take precedence over age, but even then a pre-literate society would tend to accord status to the elderly as the keepers of societal lore.

After the elders came the warriors, the young men entrusted with hunting and with preserving the safety of the village, tribe or state. Since both activities involved considerable danger, special performance forms and rituals evolved to honour and spur on these men. Indeed, amongst some ethnic groups, such as the Masai of Kenya and Tanzania and the Ethiopian Oromo, one could not be fully accepted as a man until one had killed either a human enemy or a particularly dangerous animal. All societies appear to have had dances and poetic forms which celebrated the deeds

of warriors. However, in the village young men were an integrated part of the community, and the status of warrior only entitled these men to particular rights and honours at specific times. When they were not required as defenders of the community the warriors generally took part in the normal routines of village life. As nation-states arose, however, warriors became professional servants of chiefs and kings. The dances they performed and the poems created in their honour consequently changed from an integrated aspect of village life to specialist forms glorifying arms and the state rather than the life of the people. We see this particularly in the Ndebele, a people born of militaristic strife who evolved elaborate war-dance rituals performed by hosts of semi-professional warriors in honour of their king.

The growth of such "trade" differentiations is apparent as societies move away from communalism. The highly stratified groups who live on Ukerewe, an island in Lake Victoria, developed specialist instruments for different professions. Hunters alone could play the "*enzomba*" – an animal horn, or the "*omwombe*" – a branch used as a flute. Hippopotamus hunters and fishermen both had their own kinds of horn, whilst drums, as among many of the interlacustrine tribes of Tanzania, were reserved exclusively for royalty.²²

On particular occasions, especially those concerned with initiation, family rites such as weddings and funerals, or averting evil to a particular group or individual, religious ritual dances and dramas occurred which even in the most communalistic societies did not include a role for everyone. For example the Tanzanian Wasukuma had a dance called "*mbina ya mabasa*" – the dance of twins. This dance was part of a ritual carried out by only the "*ngongo*" (traditional healer and spiritual leader) and the parents of twins, for twins were viewed as a dangerous deviation from the norm and a ritual lasting up to five months was needed to make such a family "safe." Similarly, the "*libandha*" dance of the Wapogoro (Tanzania) was a part of an exorcism ritual and could be performed only by men and women aged around forty.²³ Most of these exclusive performances were concerned with religious ritual. The important differentiation to be made between them and the performance of a Shona court jester or an Amhara lord's private *azmari* praise-poet is that even exclusive religious rituals in communalist societies ultimately served to secure the well-being of all society, whilst the jester and *azmari* worked to promote the prestige of only the hegemonic class.



²² Iliffe, *Modern History of Tanganyika*, 33–35.

²³ For further information on these dances see Elias Mahandi Songoyi, "Commercialization: Its Impact on Traditional Dances," B.Ed. thesis, University of Dar es Salaam, 1983: 3.

Dance-drama

The most well known form of African performance art is undoubtedly the dance-drama, which appears to have spread throughout the sub-Saharan region of the continent and is certainly widespread in all the countries visited for this research. Dance-drama (generally known as "*kinet*" in Ethiopia, "*ngoma*" in Tanzania and "*ingoma*" in Zimbabwe), frequently accompanied by singing and a range of instrumental backing, appeared in societies ranging from the egalitarian to the highly autocratic. In a multiplicity of manifestations dance-drama appears to have originated as an expression of village or clan unity. Although some dances are relevant only to sections of the community, many more included the whole of village society, if not as equal dancers, yet still as a participatory audience which might change roles with performers or musicians. Dancers came together to celebrate community achievements: crop planting, harvest, success in battle, hut building, initiations and weddings. The dances and dance-dramas were commonly an expression of satisfaction with the achievements of the community as a whole and reinforced the identity of that community. I am therefore inclined to argue that one of the prime functions of African dance-drama is to express the fundamental unity of the basic forms of organisation in African societies, the village and the clan.

Although all three nations studied here maintain modern troupes which collect and perform the dances of their constituent peoples, this is often as far as investigations have gone. Only in Tanzania have I found any extensive academic research into the form and function of traditional dance-dramas. My own observations indicate that certain forms of dance predominate in various regions beyond ethnic or tribal barriers. So, in Ethiopia, the dances of many ethnic groups specialise in rapid shaking of the chest and shoulders as a major feature of the performance. To vibrate the upper body particularly fast is a sign of great virtuosity. At the same time the often ubiquitous African drum takes a minor place in favour of an array of wind and string instruments and a separate choral group. As we move into central East Africa the thighs and buttocks of women take on a predominant role, while the male dance moves towards the acrobatic. An enormous variety of drums perform a central rhythmic role, but there is also what Ranger refers to as the *kazoo zone*²⁴ and in certain areas xylophones are common. Shona dances also feature the female bottom, athletic leaps, drums and xylophones and, as with many of their performance forms, the dances bear a close resemblance to those of the Ndebele people. All cultures contain scope for individual soloists within the communal dance, and allow for times when a single person, a couple or a small group separate themselves from the mass in order to perform a virtuoso "act" within the context of the overall dance.

²⁴ See T.O. Ranger, *Dance and Society in Eastern Africa 1980-1970: The Beni Ngoma*, (London: Heinemann, 1976): 72.

In making such generalisations one has to be aware that modern performers have often lifted popular, and especially sexual, elements of a particular dance, and have either exaggerated them or imposed them on the dances of other ethnic groups in which they did not originally feature. Several Tanzanian researchers and even the Tanzanian Ministry of Culture have on various occasions expostulated at commercial entertainment troupes' habit of including the highly sexual bottom wiggle (often emphasised by the tying of a "*kanga*"²⁵ around a woman's bottom to make it appear especially prominent) in a range of dances where it originally had no place, simply in order to please urban audiences' desire for titillation.²⁶ However, it would seem natural that different cultures should frequently have borrowed successful dance elements in situations where they had easy access to each other. In the Ethiopian case it appears that the highland imperialists influenced to varying degrees the dances of their subject peoples. The shoulders become an ever stronger feature of the dance as one moves towards the core areas of the Amhara Empire, but their role is plainly in evidence even in the dances of the extreme southern groups of the Oromo and Somalis.

It is not always the politically dominant group, however, which culturally affects its neighbours. In Tanzania, Swahili culture undoubtedly made a great impact on the inland people in the nineteenth century as it was brought along the great trading routes. But although "modern" Swahilised groups spread some dances such as the "*Beni ngoma*" and later "*dansi*" throughout the territory, Tanzania still possesses a myriad of enormously divergent *ngoma* traditions testifying to the number and diversity of her ethnic groups. In Zimbabwe, Misheck Sibanda claims that "*Nguni*"²⁷ music and dance forms as well as religious beliefs were greatly influenced by the culture of indigenous societies."²⁸ The Ndebele were an *nguni* people and successfully invaded Shona areas, yet here we see cultural influences being exerted by a numerically superior but politically dominated group. More research would be needed amongst peoples enjoying similar relationships in order to ascertain the circumstances under which cultural invasions parallel the possession of political and military power.

²⁵ A *kanga* is brightly patterned multi-purposed piece of cloth commonly worn by East African women as a dress, shawl, skirt or baby-carrier.

²⁶ Tanzania has many cultural troupes, particularly in Dar es Salaam, which perform dance, acrobatics, music and theatre in public beer-halls. They are very popular but have been frequently criticised both by university and government for being too commercially oriented.

²⁷ *Nguni* is a term applied to a group of closely related tribes; the Zulu, Shangaan, Ngoni and Matabele, who were driven northwards by the European invasion of what is now South Africa.

²⁸ J. Misheck Sibanda, "Early Foundations of African Nationalism," in *Turmoil and Tenacity: Zimbabwe 1980-1990*, ed. Canaan Banana (Harare: College Press, 1989): 29.

Even supposing that research were available, it is beyond the scope of this chapter to go into detail concerning the enormous number of dance-dramas performed in the areas of this study. Instead, I will select a small number of different types of dance which appear to me to be in some way representative.

Many societies from which I have been able to collect evidence appear to have forms of labour dances. These undoubtedly grew out of the communal singing which encouraged workers in such tasks as grain planting, harvesting and winnowing. In his thesis on traditional Ndebele drama, Lizwe Nkala speaks of work songs as being common.²⁹ The melody was usually sung by a leader, with a repetitive chorus taken up by the mass of workers. Such songs maintained work rhythm and encouraged labourers in what were strenuous and potentially boring tasks. From the songs, dances developed as a form of celebration or thanksgiving for the successful completion of the agricultural cycle. These would be either secular or part of a religious celebration. For example, the Zulu and Ndebele had an elaborate first-fruits ceremony, "*ukuchinsa*," which might last up to six days and climaxed in the performance of celebratory dances and songs before the king. This was a religious festival. In contrast, the "*Bugobogobo*" dance of the Tanzanian Wasukuma was purely secular and evolved out of the drums and rattles worn by peasants who came together for communal cultivation. In modern times this dance has been elaborated to demonstrate not only the round of agricultural activities but also how the people are prepared to fight to defend their crops.³⁰

Many dances were purely social and secular. Indeed, amongst the Christian peoples of Ethiopia and the Muslim Swahili of East Africa, folk-dances were distanced from official religion and became generally secular, although both peoples used traditional magic rituals which at times involved dance. In these societies secular dances might be celebratory, as for a marriage, a birth or a battle victory, or might be simply an occasion where people met in slack periods of the agricultural year to join in dances which were often markedly sexual and related to courting procedures. In many societies beer-drinking, feasting and dancing were largely synonymous with each other. A communal hut-building or harvesting session meant that the owner of the land or house would be expected to reward his helpers with food and alcohol. In such cases a dance could develop spontaneously.

Ritual dance took place on many occasions. Such dances might involve whole communities or be restricted to directly affected groups and kept highly secret from those not included in the ceremony. The latter case was particularly common in the case of initiation ceremonies. Ritual dance-drama was commonly a very serious affair. Much time might be needed to prepare for a proper dance which required a

²⁹ See Lizwe Nkala, "Indigenous Forms of Drama in Traditional Ndebele and Zulu Societies."

³⁰ See E.M. Songoyi, "Commercialization: Its Impact on Traditional Dances," 11.

high degree of organisation and could only occur according to strict rules of time and place. Strong conventions were attached to many dances, which were often only the climax, along with a feast, of a long ritual process. The dances had recognised patrons who were community leaders or *n'gangas*.

One of the most extreme cases of ritual encompassing dance as a pure form of worship came into being with the dancing priests of the Ethiopian Orthodox church (see Figs. 1–2). The priests follow an interpretation of the dictum in the Old Testament Book of Samuel that “all the house of Israel [should play] before the Lord” (Samuel 2, 6:5). Their dance is slow and stately, performed in two facing lines with the priests in full vestments and accompanied by the drum and sistrum.³¹ I believe the Ethiopians are unique amongst Christians in having a dance of worship carried out purely by the priesthood. It is one of the many manifestations in Ethiopian culture of the mixing of Old Testament Judaic practices with Christianity. It is also important to note that this exclusive dance reflects the Ethiopian church's deliberate distancing of itself from the people, who may only look on at a semi-divine process in which they are considered too ignorant and sinful to take part.

I think there is a case for suggesting that monotheistic churches have often arisen in conjunction with strong centralising states, and that their rituals became more and more exclusive as the need grew to differentiate rank and role in increasingly complex and specialised societies. Amongst peoples moving from communalism towards a feudal state a need arises for religion to reflect increasingly hierarchical ideas of social order. Heavenly hierarchies with God, Messiah and angels, and the ordering of Christian churches with their Popes, *Abunas*³² and Archbishops at the head of strong ranking systems, reflected a correlation of the spiritual world with feudal ranks on earth. This class-ridden view of heaven and earth served the interests of both Christian and Islamic ruling groups. The ordinary people were to find it increasingly difficult to reach the source of spiritual power, a monotheist God, except through the intercession of the priesthood and the panoply of saints (as they did to reach the king except via the aristocracy and court functionaries). This contrasts with animist religions which see God as a remote figure accessible to neither spiritual leaders nor the populace. Instead, animists have a much more immediate relationship with the host of supernatural powers and the ancestors who exist in close symbiosis with mankind, as the clan leaders live closely with their people. Ritual performance forms reflect this difference in approach to spiritual hierarchies.

³¹ For further information on priestly dance, see Sylvia Pankhurst, *Ethiopia: A Cultural History* (London: Lalibela House, 1955): 242–44.

³² The *Abuna* is the name given to the head of the Ethiopian Orthodox church. Historically he had to be an Egyptian priest appointed by the Egyptian Coptic Church.

Ethiopian church dances are not performed for the benefit of the people in the same way as the dance led by a village *n'ganga* or a Makonde spirit mask. The latter may lead their people in dance or perform a solo before the village audience, but they are partaking in a ritual which is normally performed at the people's request and for the continued well-being of the entire interlinked communalist society. Moreover, when not performing their specialist functions such ritual dancers are participating members of village life. Islam and Christianity have rejected and at times sought to outlaw communalist rituals in favour of liturgies and dances which could only be performed by specialists. The Ethiopian priests dance not to serve a community's immediate needs but for the glory of God and to satisfy the demands of the church. Unlike the performance of an animist leader they require no audience to validate their actions. There is a significant difference here between Islam and Christianity. Christianity came to its full strength in feudal eras, both in Europe and Ethiopia, but Islam arose in nomadic societies at a mid-point in their development between communalism and feudalism. I think this difference is reflected in Moslems' historically more open attitudes to the democratic ordering of such questions as who can lead prayers, the incorporation of local elements of worship, and the less elaborate and exclusive performance rituals of Islam compared to those of Christianity.

Drama

In view of what has been implied earlier about the lack of formal drama in pre-colonial Africa, it may seem odd to include a section on drama here. However, there are a few instances to be found of purely secular dramatic enactments, as well as dances which veer heavily towards drama, and the rituals which include not only a dramatic format but also spoken dramatic interludes.

Recent studies of the Shona have brought to light the use of drama in communal life. T.K. Tsodzo is a contemporary Zimbabwean dramatist who has carried out research into traditional Shona performance arts, and he speaks of a form of drama utilised for the purposes of social criticism.³³ This apparently occurred after the peasantry had been engaged in carrying out their feudal land service on the chief's property. After work was completed there could be a dramatisation in which a chief's faults, such as corruption or drunkenness, would be acted out and commented on, a performance which was presumably not only cathartic for the participants but also created an acceptable conduit for public opinion to be passed on to higher authorities.

³³ See T.K. Tsodzo, "Traditional Dramatization," unpublished paper, University of Zimbabwe, 1988.

Such critical use of drama also had a role to play in Shona rituals. Ritual mourning services are often elaborate in African societies and serve as a valuable mechanism for the purging of grief. The complete process may take months or even years, during which a series of ceremonies are held to bid the deceased farewell from the world of the living and usher him into an afterlife in the world of the ancestors. In Shona society this process took a year, and a crucial dramatic role was played by the "*varoora*," the dead man's nephew's wives. Once the body was laid out and the mourners had gathered, these women were expected to dramatise the personality of the dead man in graphic detail. They might dress up in his clothes or imitate any aspects of his personality, and were generally expected to entertain the mourners and lighten their sorrow. They also played drums, danced and sang in order to raise money from the mourners to pay for the burial feast. After a year a further ceremony was held in which the dead man was portrayed waking up amongst the ancestors. Prior to this the *varoora* were expected to imitate all the dead person's most unpleasant character traits so that his soul could renounce evil and enter the afterlife as a good ancestor who would then seek to help those who remained alive.

These dramas seem to me to have similar functions in allowing subordinate classes to express negative feelings about their superior, and bear a relationship to the temporary freedom given to medieval peasants in European carnivals. Injustice and oppression can be exposed within contained conditions and such performances also warn dominant males when they are going beyond the bounds of behaviour acceptable in a ruling class. Interestingly, I have found no other dramatisations which quite parallel those of the Shona.

Drama may also be used for teaching purposes. Tanzanian researchers in particular have often emphasised the didactic elements present in many traditional dramatic rituals. Writers such as Mlamba, Lihamba and Fiebach³⁴ have argued that many rituals had a high degree of social function. They stress this point because modern Tanzanian theatre takes its teaching role very seriously indeed, and the playwrights concerned see themselves as the inheritors of an African tradition of socially responsible performance art. This is contrasted with the drama introduced and encouraged by the West, which, they claim, has encouraged escapist entertainment, violent fantasy and denigrating comedy, trivialising the original serious role of theatre in African societies.

Initiation rituals for both boys and girls have commonly included instruction which could involve dramatisation, teaching children about the roles they would be

³⁴ All these three have been lecturers at Dar es Salaam University, and were to varying degrees profoundly influenced both by *ujamaa* and the high level of Marxist-socialist debate which took place at the University in the late Sixties and the Seventies.

expected to perform as adult members of society. These attuned the individual to his/her immediate society and to that society's perceptions of the wider universe. For example, coming-of-age ceremonies which included physical ordeals existed in many of the societies I am dealing with and taught fortitude, whilst courtship rituals often include dramatic enactments which establish a couple's relationship not only to each other but also within society. This is exemplified in the considerable ceremonials surrounding Wallega-Oromo (Ethiopia) courtship and weddings. Here a formal request to marry has to be carried from the boy's family to the girl's, while the girl, in her role of innocent, must pretend not to understand what is taking place. Only when the family accept the proposal can the prospective groom crown his bride with grasses before the couple feed each other in sign of mutual dependence and honour. At the wedding the groom's family come to take the girl, and a symbolic fight ensues between the bride and groom's family which emphasises the value of the woman and also the change taking place in her ownership. The bride must cry and pretend to be sad to leave her family, and there is even a scripted dialogue (the only instance I have found of such a thing in traditional drama forms) between the families as the bride is handed over and the groom's father pays for the girl.³⁵ The whole process establishes the young couple's junior role in respect to their parents, teaches the groom to value his wife and reinforces in the bride the importance of qualities such as modesty and obedience, above all teaching her that she is a possession now changing hands, becoming subject to the will of a new family unit as represented by the groom and his father.

At times traditional dramas also taught direct lessons about expected patterns of behaviour. The "*Digubi*" ritual of the Kaguri women of Tanzania's Morogoro region has been castigated in modern times as obscene by puritanical officials, yet it was an initiation ceremony which used dance, song, music and mime to demonstrate graphically to young girls how to deal with such intimate female matters as menstruation and what to expect of first sexual experiences.³⁶ This ceremony had religious affiliations, but the Shona had a similar, secular ceremony for young women about to be married. The "*kuvhundunyura mushunje (ritual)*" was an exclusively female affair and involved older friends of the bride staging a seduction scene, complete with a "husband" figure. The aim was both to explain the process of sexual intercourse and to encourage the woman to be sexually adventurous in order to enhance her husband's pleasure.³⁷

Ritual dance and drama frequently overlap, with the dance often featuring as a climax to a much longer ritual process which may involve a months-long dramatic

³⁵ See Amare Berta, "Ethiopian Traditional Drama," 1982.

³⁶ For details on *digubi*, see Penina Mlama, "Tanzanian Traditional Theatre."

³⁷ For details on *kuvhundunyura mushunje*, see T.K. Tsodzo, "Traditional Dramatization."

sequence of ceremonies. These rituals have been equated by recent researchers with the scenes and acts of a play, complete with periods of climax, rest times, occasional comedy and a final dénouement which ends the ceremonial and leaves the audience/participants cleansed for the resumption of ordinary life. It is, however, important to note that by no means all rituals have such dramatic elements, just as one must be aware that use of drama is not limited to religious ceremonial.

Orature

Orature is a performance form which is widespread throughout Africa, as indeed it probably was in pre-literate societies worldwide. Story-telling is the most widespread form of orature. In some cases the story-teller may also be a local historian who recounts the glories of the past and so imbues his people with a sense of local pride and unity. The target audience of the story-teller is usually, but by no means always, the children of the village.

In traditional societies stories were important matters. They were not told lightly at any time of day, but most commonly at night, by the fireside, and often only at certain seasons of the year when agricultural work was not overly demanding. The stories almost always had a strong educational element. They warned of sins such as laziness, selfishness and naivety, and often urged the listener to be crafty and brave. Stories frequently featured anthropomorphic animal characters which represent certain human types and may reappear in many tales.

Traditionally there is often considerable ceremonial attached to the telling of stories. I have been unable to find out how much this is the case in Ethiopia, but in many parts of Tanzania and Zimbabwe there are fixed forms for both beginning and ending a story. The Swahili form requires the story-teller to begin by saying "*Paukwa*" – a word alerting the audience and to which they must reply "*Pakarwa*." This formula may be repeated several times until the story-teller feels he is being listened to with sufficient attention. The Shona also have a fixed form of words by which the "*sarungano*" announces not only the start but also the close of his tale.

In recent years many African nations have started to become aware of the importance of their oral literatures, and collections of stories have been published. Jan Knappert, a scholar of Kiswahili, has brought together a collection of tales which he divides according to twelve categories.³⁸ Because the Swahili are long-time Muslims, several categories relate to aspects of Islam, but there are also stories about magic, trickery, animals, and the evil and lustfulness of women. All these areas appear to be widespread matters of concern in the societies I have studied.

³⁸ Jan Knappert, *Myths and Legends of the Swahili* (Nairobi: Heinemann, 1970).

Magic is believed in across the continent, no matter whether the population is Christian, Islamic or animist. Animist religions commonly believe in a multitude of minor spirits operating under the aegis of a remote god-figure, and many stories relate to the powers of these spirits, inhabiting the borders between true religion and magic. In Christian and Islamic societies the spirits have often been transformed into angels or devils, or people may maintain allegiances to elements of earlier religions along with their monotheistic beliefs. This latter case is particularly true in the case of Islam, which has traditionally been more tolerant of pluralistic beliefs than has Christianity (although Ethiopian orthodox Christianity has stories about hosts of djinns, devils and evil spirits). In Islamic areas, particularly those where there is a strong Arab influence, imported magical stories of the Scheherazade variety are widespread. Finally, a firm belief in witches, possession and medicine men is common throughout Africa. These people may be forces for good or evil, and tales of their alleged magical powers are widespread.

Trickery is an interesting category. Although bravery and stoicism are highly admired virtues in the countries I have visited, the trickster is the real hero of many stories. Most commonly the hare, physically fairly weak but clever and a linguistic virtuoso, is the signifier for the trickster, although the hare can sometimes be outwitted by the tortoise, as in the famous tale of the race between the two which figures in several societies. The Western hero with his tragic flaw meshes uneasily with this tradition, where to be stupid is to invite death and disaster. Many African stories can be brutal according to Western standards, and physical disability or death are often the punishment of the foolish or too trusting.

Animals are common signifiers of a range of human characteristics. The lion is brave but boastful and none too bright, the monkey mischievous, and the hare and tortoise are notorious tricksters. For reasons I have yet to understand, some such signifiers operate across many African societies, whilst others, like the Ndebele belief in the vanity of the hippopotamus or the Shona story of the stupidity of the duiker, relate to more individual groups.³⁹ It seems clear that animals are commonly used because, less complex than human beings, they are more easily understood symbols of moral values for children.

Women, presumably because the majority of story-tellers were men, are frequently evil. Lecherous, lazy, tricky and incapable of appreciating a good man, they are frequently presented as the greatest danger to mankind. There are stories of good women but they are rare. It seems that Islamic and Christian societies, with their deeply imbued belief that women are the cause of man's expulsion from Paradise, are more prone to stories of evil sexual women than animist cultures.

³⁹ See Norman Atkinson, *"The Broken Promise" and Other Traditional Fables From Zimbabwe* (Harare: Academic Books, 1989).

Story-tellers were usually an integrated part of village life; simply elders who happened to have story-telling skills. However, non-specialists could also tell stories. Knappert says that the Kiswahili-speaking Arab traders of the nineteenth century loved recounting tales and would swap stories as they travelled the trade routes of the East African interior.⁴⁰ The itinerant professional story-teller who earned his living by moving from place to place selling his skills seems to be a feature only of larger empires and probably became more common in the early colonial period. There are also some who argue that the story-teller's theatrical skills grew with changing modern demands. David Cook, writing from Uganda in the 1960s, claimed that "The story-teller has become more of an actor than he used to be, and he now often enlists the help of his wife and friends to act out the tale he is telling."⁴¹ However, even rural tellers of tales employ a range of dramatic techniques. The use of different voices for different characters is a common device. Gesture is freely allowed, and the story-teller may get up and move about to emphasise his message. It has also been pointed out that the telling of stories by flickering firelight adds to their dramatic impact. In some places audience participation, in the form of response to ritual questions and joining in with songs, also features.

In many societies story-telling was only one part of an entertainer's skill. The Amhara *azmaris* were primarily praise-singing musicians; story-telling might be an extra way of earning a little money. Amongst the Shona, to be a story-teller was not enough to qualify for being a master of orature. A "*nyanduri*," who was highly admired, had also to be skilled in various sharply differentiated forms of orature:

A master of all these traditional genres, in their various forms and diction, is called a "*nyanduri*." His sensitive and discriminating ear and tongue are formed by a long experience of the traditions and settings of the oral poetry. This social experience is now no longer generally available. Would-be poets who use the traditional genres tend to confuse them, placing together lines from a daughter-in-law's complaint with others from the game of spinning groundpeas, "*kusika nyimbo*," and still others from the indirect warning and complaint uttered at night against a man's unknown witches, "*bembera*."⁴²

If such pedantry in differentiating forms sounds strange to the Western mind, the Shona were by no means unique in their admiration for rhetorical skill demanding understanding and compliance with a strict set of constructional rules.

It would require a more extensive study of traditional societies than I have undertaken to fully prove the point, but it appears that the more elaborately organised and hierarchical a society was, the more emphasis it put on highly stylised oratorical, and particularly poetic forms, and that these became increasingly the pre-

⁴⁰ Knappert, *Myths and Legends*, Introduction.

⁴¹ David Cook & Miles Lee, *Short East African Plays* (Nairobi: Heinemann, 1970): 7.

⁴² A.C. Hodza & George Fortune, *Shona Praise Poetry*, 27.

serve of specialist groups which derived status and differentiation from the mass of the people by virtue of their talents. Moreover, such specialists were often enlisted by the state and/or religious authorities in order to enhance hegemonic prestige and to set the élite above the mass of the people. I do not think there has been sufficient recognition to date of the extent to which art was valued as a political tool by many pre-colonial states. My findings lead me to argue that in feudally oriented states certain performance forms were undoubtedly valued for their role in enhancing the prestige of both secular and religious élites. As in the case of the dance of the Ethiopian priests described above, orature was also annexed in these societies to serve the interests of the ruling classes.

The praise-poem and heroic recitations were forms particularly used to honour the secular élite, the warriors and nobility. Praise-poems are a widespread phenomenon, but are possibly most common in more developed war-like states. They consist of improvised poems or songs in honour of great warriors, of the clan, tribe or state, or of kings and nobility. Amongst the Zulu and Ndebele, Nkala tells us, the "*imbongi*" or praise-singer was greatly honoured. Before the Zulu became a militaristic nation under King Shaka from 1816 onwards, "*izibongo*" or praise-poems were composed about such topics as love and hunting, but with the rise of militarism and the monarchy Zulu and Ndebele praise-poems turned increasingly to issues of war and praise of the king. Anyone could sing a praise-poem to himself or his equals, but as society developed so did praise-singing specialists, who worked exclusively for the king. The *imbongi* was even more theatrical than the story-teller, for he never stood still but walked, leapt and gestured with increasing vigour as he reached the climax of his poem. He also wore a special costume of animal skins for his performance. The *imbongi* appears to have developed from a poet of personal and community issues to a servant of the emergent monarchy, until at the height of Ndebele power we are told that "The '*imbongi*' functioned as a cadre of the political ideology of this time."⁴³

In Ethiopian Amhara society we see the *imbongi* transformed into the *azmari*. With the more complex state comes the increasing specialisation of the performer. Whereas the *imbongi* was a part-time artist within his community, the *azmaris* were a professional caste group who no longer participated in communalist activities but existed purely as entertainers. Their main function was to improvise praise-poems. Even as early as 1520 we hear from the Portuguese traveller Alvares that the Emperor had *azmaris* attached to his retinue. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries there is sufficient mention of *azmaris* to make it clear that Amhara aristocrats would expect to support such a performer to entertain their household and sing the lord's

⁴³ Lizwe Nkala, "Indigenous Forms of Drama in Traditional Ndebele and Zulu Societies," 25. It should be noted that Ndebele performers of praise-poetry upholding the tradition in Zimbabwe today can also be women (see Figs. 21–22).

praises. It is unclear how the practice evolved, but in more recent years many *azmaris* have become wanderers between celebrations and bars who will sing anyone's praises in exchange for a little money, often plastered on the performer's sweating brow by the praisee to demonstrate his gratitude and munificence.⁴⁴ *Azmaris* also had a traditional place on the battlefield, where they would perform in praise of kings and warriors and brace the troops for battle (cf Fig. 5). Unlike Ndebele *imbongi*, *azmaris* were not gestural performers. Outside war, farming and the dance, Amhara culture looks down upon excessive movement as a sign of ill-breeding. Instead, the *azmari* sings praises, usually to the accompaniment of the *masinko*, and he gains fame for his skill in improvising witty and apt verses in honour of his subject.

Herdeck⁴⁵ defines praise songs as one of six classes of traditional Shona poetry, but Hodza and Fortune⁴⁶ break this categorisation down further. They say that there were three main types of praise-poem, the clan praise, personal praises, and boasts. The question of boasting I will deal with below under the less pejorative title of heroic recitation. Of the other two, it appears that the most common kind of praise-poetry was that addressed to leaders, and Shona kings had their own musicians and entertainers who would produce praise-poems on demand. The Shona also had "*marombe*," strolling players who moved from village to village, but whose prime function was to exuberantly celebrate chiefly authority. Since the Shona had both feudal and communalist forms of society it is not surprising that they produced both localised clan poetry and more specialised entertainment performed by a professional in support of centralised feudal power.

The heroic recitation or boast is a form which enjoyed prominence in many communalist societies. Apart from the Shona and Ndebele I have found most reference to this art amongst Tanzanian tribes, where several ethnic groups have traditions of "*majigambo*" or heroic recitation.⁴⁷ The classic style of *majigambo* seems to have been performed by a local warrior who would return from battle to take part in a celebration where he would improvise a poem in praise of himself and his valour, his clan and his ancestors. Once again, this was often a very theatrical event, for as the warrior recited his verse he would dance, and imitate his prowess with the spear, and might be vocally supported by his admirers.

⁴⁴ This practice is by no means unique to the Amharas but is widespread in many African cultures as a means of rewarding musical, dramatic or sporting excellence.

⁴⁵ Solomon M. Mutswairo & Donald E. Herdeck, *Zimbabwe: Prose and Poetry* (Washington DC: Three Continents, 1974): 125.

⁴⁶ Hodza & Fortune, *Shona Praise Poetry*: 27.

⁴⁷ For further information on *majigambo* see Amandina Lihamba, "Politics and Theatre in Tanzania after the Arusha Declaration, 1967–1984," doctoral dissertation, Leeds University, 1985, ch. 1.

Such heroic recitations were probably only appropriate to localised communalistic societies. As chieftainships grew, so the dignity of the leader demanded that he differentiate himself from the mass of the people. A local champion, in praising himself and his forbears, was linking himself with his village's common heritage. He was the people's hero and identified with them. However, chiefly glory in a feudal setting relied on divorcing oneself from the people. The chief could no longer praise himself but required an inferior, albeit the most skilled performer he could find, to sing of his now supra-personal glory and to identify him, not directly with the people, but with the power of the state or even, at times, with divinity.

Linguistic skill is traditionally admired in many pre-literate societies, for to control language is potentially to control men. In communalist societies decisions affecting the community were usually made by a council of elders. To argue well was therefore to be a potentially powerful man. As societies grew more complex, such skills remained important. Even amongst nominally literate peoples such as the Swahili and Amhara, knowledge of reading and writing was confined to an élite, often ecclesiastical, few. Even rich and powerful men relied on their tongues to persuade others to their following. This was particularly true of the Amharas, a notoriously litigious people, who expected the course of justice to follow not only the man who bribed most heavily but also the one with the most persuasive tongue.

Given such respect for rhetoric, it is hardly surprising that poetic skills were greatly honoured in many African societies. Poetry, usually in song form, exists in all the areas I am studying. The six classes of Shona poetry which Herdeck lists covers, the main areas in the vast majority of societies examined. They are: first, work songs; second, dance and party songs for use at social gatherings; and third, ancestral, religious and spirit songs. War songs, children's and didactic poetry and praise-poems complete the list. All these forms of poetry were liable to extensive dramatisation with much use of gesture and evocative music, a trait which can be seen to this day, for many African school children in my experience are taught to recite poetry with extensive recourse to dramatic gesture.

The move towards spoken as opposed to sung poetry appears to be largely a reflection of more sophisticated societies. In Ethiopia there is evidence of such an evolutionary process. The earliest "*qene*" poetry was sung, but by the nineteenth century the form had become increasingly a spoken art. The most elaborate poetic forms also appear in the most complex states. Riddles and proverbs, potential precursors to poetry proper, abound in many African societies, to such an extent that older people may pride themselves on being able to carry out an entire conversation in proverb form,⁴⁸ and even now the annual Tanzanian National Arts and Language

⁴⁸ I personally encountered this form of conversation first amongst the Wolof women of the Gambia, but it is also common in many other traditional African societies.

Festival has a section devoted to riddling. However, poetry in the accepted Western sense appears to have reached its greatest heights of complexity amongst the three ethnic groups I have previously referred to as examples of feudal as opposed to communalistic states; the Shona, Amhara, and Swahili.

The Shona *nyanduri* has been mentioned above. His linguistic skill was referred to as “*nyandwi*” and required knowledge of a host of differentiated forms of poetry. Orphans, victims of witchcraft and daughter-in-law’s poems all conformed to separate stylistic rules, as well as “*nhembo*” – death elegies, “*madatembedzo*” – love poetry and “*ndyanguro*” – recitals for specifically adult entertainment.

Formalism also constrained the Amhara and Swahili poets, although in both cases the poet was expected to be original in the way he expressed his message within the limitations of any particular form. Such poetry reflects the ornate ordering of these feudal societies. Moreover, in both places poetry was seen as a form which had originally the prime purpose of serving God, whether he was the Christian or the Muslim deity. It was only later adopted by secular leaders who saw the scope such forms provided for bolstering their own prestige and that of the state.

Pre-colonial literature

The first known Kiswahili poetry dates back to the thirteenth century. Swahili society at that time was composed of some thirty towns extending along the East African coast from Mogadishu to Mozambique. It was a devoutly Islamic society, and Knappert claims that:

The main theme of traditional Swahili poetry is invariably religious. It deals with moral precepts and instructions regarding ritual, praises of God and His Prophet, the horrors of Hell and the pleasures of Paradise. Where the moral rules are not given directly, they are given, by implication, in the form of *historia Sancta*, the legendary history of the Prophet, his family and his followers. As such these legendary stories are of the greatest importance to members of the traditional Swahili society: they provide the individual with a sure guide to life in this world. The perfect example of the Prophet and his followers is the model of life that must be imitated by everyone who desires to attain Paradise. These legends are not entertainment, they are *elimu*, knowledge required for all who want to lead a righteous life.⁴⁹

In recent years scholars like Joe Mbele, Ann Bierstecker and Mark Plane have challenged Knappert’s view that all Swahili poetry was religious. They point out that there exist works with significant social and political content, but certainly the teaching element remains strong in the vast majority of the early poems. Moreover, these poets, as is common in pre-capitalistic societies, gave voice not to individual but to communal feelings: “The Swahili poet expresses what his community feels,

⁴⁹ Jan Knappert, *Traditional Swahili Poetry: An Investigation into the Concepts of East African Islam as Reflected in the Utenzi Literature* (Leiden: Brill, 1967): 11.

the ideals to which it aspires, and for this he is regarded as a man of great knowledge and wisdom.”⁵⁰ Many early Swahili poets worked purely orally, the earliest extant manuscript dating back only to 1749.

Amharinya poetry moves through much the same progression from orature to literature. *Qene* supposedly dates back to the sixth century AD, but it was only in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries that written poetry became more common.⁵¹ Once more religious poetry predominates, although there are records of secular poetry dating back to the fourteenth century.

In examining these different kinds of poetry, one is moving into the interface between performance skills, orature and literature. Yet although the Swahili and Amhara religious, and later, imperial, poets became increasingly literary biased their art is important to record here because it evolved from earlier oral forms and has had a profound influence on written drama. Many scholars have looked at African drama almost purely as a literary form. Primarily this is because it was first studied within literature departments, but also because published plays and related literary works are far more easily available for academic study than live performances which require the researcher to move outside a university library. Such research has, in my opinion, lamentably failed to understand that published drama is merely a fraction of African theatre. It has also commonly judged plays almost entirely from within the Western perspective of what constitutes “good” literature or drama – although this is slowly changing. With the rise of theatre departments and a rapidly growing number of professional theatre personnel on the African continent, studies of performance begin to emerge which contest the view that theatre is primarily a matter of literary study. In the discussion that follows below, I look at pre-colonial literature merely as one of the many art forms which has had a part to play in the development of contemporary African theatre.

In both Amhara and Swahili society poetry is the literary form which dominates, and this would appear to be a direct development of the various forms of oral poetry discussed above. The Swahili refer to poetry as a necklace of pearls, in comparison with the prose which is described as unstrung jewellery.⁵² In both societies poetry conforming to rigid structural rules was the most admired form of literature. Gérard describes how this formalism works for the major Swahili form, the “*utendi*” or epic narrative poem:

⁵⁰ Jan Knappert, *Four Centuries of Swahili Verse* (London: Heinemann, 1979): xiv.

⁵¹ *Qene* was supposedly invented by Saint Yared, who lived in the sixth century. The Ethiopian church apparently had no music before his time, but Yared composed a series of hymns which subsequently developed into *qene*.

⁵² Knappert, *Four Centuries of Swahili Verse*, xv.

Such poems obey very strict prosodic rules, as each stanza is composed of four eight-syllable lines, of which the first three rhyme together, while the fourth carries a rhyme that is repeated as the terminal rhyme throughout the poem.⁵³

The Amhara carried this delight in formal poetry to an extreme in their religious institutions, the "*Qene beitoch*" or poetry houses. These were specialist schools where religious students, after completing their basic education, might spend up to ten years studying under a master. Each morning a subject would be given to the students, who would spend the day composing a poem to be recited in the evening. Such poetry had to conform to one of twelve categories which set the length of the poem. Each verse had to contain a set number of words, and was required to have both rhyme and rhythm.

I am unsure why these feudal African societies evolved such elaborate poetic forms, but they do seem to reflect the hierarchical structures and essentially conservative organisation of the states in question. The poet was expected to be original (as in the case of oral literature) in the manner he handled his material, but he was required to perform within a set framework, which was possibly intended to emphasise his insignificance and the over-riding requirement for the individual to serve within accepted conventions rather than challenge and create society anew according to his own vision.

It is undoubtedly an important factor that literary learning was available almost exclusively through religious institutions. Levine explains that:

Amhara formal education in no wise seeks to cultivate the individual, but aims solely to prepare cultural specialists who will be able to perform the rituals and perpetuate the teachings of the Ethiopian church.⁵⁴

Much the same could be said of Islamic teaching, and since in both the societies I am concerned with here, and indeed in most pre-capitalistic societies world-wide, the church and state were closely allied, access to religious learning meant at least possible access to state as well as religious power.

In the pre-colonial period education was reserved for a small élite. Indeed, in Ethiopia, when feudal rule was finally overthrown in 1974 only some seven percent of the population was literate. Feudal societies had no interest in mass education. Learning was used to serve the élite and widen the gulf between it and the people in order to reinforce church/state dominance. Literary art was therefore necessarily élitist, and this tendency was possibly reinforced by a delight in riddling, mystifica-

⁵³ Albert Gérard, *African Language Literatures: An Introduction to the Literary History of Sub-Saharan Africa* (Washington DC: Three Continents, 1981): 97.

⁵⁴ Donald N. Levine, *Wax and Gold: Tradition and Innovation in Ethiopian Culture*, (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1965): 267.

tion and the use of *double entendres* within the poetry produced both by the Swahili and the Amharas.

The apogee of this poetic art was reached with the Amhara use of "*samena worq*" within the *qene* form. *Samena worq* means wax and gold and

is the formula used by the Amhara to symbolise their favourite form of verse. It is a form built of two semantic layers. The apparent, figurative meaning of the words is called "wax"; their more or less hidden actual significance is the "gold."⁵⁵

In the *qene beit* students were taught to produce poetry wherein the overt and the hidden meanings of their work were as different as possible. They relied heavily on the use of *double entendre*, for many Amharinya words have multiple meanings which lend themselves to such usage. Amhara society was intensely secretive, and even in secular life devious use of language was admired as a sign of a cultivated man. Possibly this fits in with the cult of the trickster. Interestingly the Swahili had a form not dissimilar to *samena worq* called "*kufumba*":

The verb [...] to describe this operation of mystification *kufumba*, is one which has been long associated with poetic practice. In traditional discourse, the noun derivatives (*fumbo/mafumbo*) are used to describe any kind of proverbial, allegorical or metaphorical language in poetry. The basic characteristic of the *fumbo* is that what is being said has to be interpreted on a different level. Thus the Swahili verb *kufumba* lacks the negative connotation of its English equivalent "to mystify." *Kufumba* is to express oneself in a way that requires interpretation. For traditional practitioners of Swahili poetry, the most respected artists are also masters of *mafumbo*.⁵⁶

These means of mystification were also important for the purposes of covert social criticism. Even in the most autocratic feudal societies there had to be some avenue left open for people to criticise their masters, and to enable those masters to gauge social opinion. Although, as I showed above, the Shona *varoora* could openly act out such criticism at the time of a death, subtle orature or literature were more common means of expressing disapprobation of the living.

Amhara *double entendres*, whether used in a praise-poem or a piece of *qene*, could be and were utilised in court criticism. Indeed the continuing tradition of autocratic rule has ensured that such techniques are still utilised in present day literature and drama. Molvaer explains how:

Amharic is eminently suited to express more than one meaning in the same word or phrase [...] Minstrels and scholars have used it to express delicate views at royal and noble courts [...] Later, political awakening and a new social consciousness made

⁵⁵ Donald Levine, *War and Gold*, 5.

⁵⁶ Robert Meyer Philipson, "Drama and National Culture: A Marxist Study of Ebrahim Hussein," doctoral dissertation, University of Wisconsin, 1989: 239.

authors see ways of expressing protest and dissent and still getting their books printed [...] The same old technique of double entendre served their purpose well.⁵⁷

Kiswahili techniques of *kufumba* were utilised for similar ends. However, possibly the most widespread medium of oral/literary criticism of the leadership was, ironically, the praise-poem. In some cases, as amongst the Ndebele, these poems could mix praise with overt criticism, but just as powerful was the absence of praise for particular characteristics. Trevor Cope explains how this mechanism worked amongst the Zulu/Ndebele tribes:

The *imbongi* [...] is in a sense the intermediary between the chief and his subjects, for, when he presents the chief to the people in his recitation, he is also representing the opinion of the people to the chief. Thus the praise-poem contains criticism as well as praise. The recital position of the praiser enables him to criticise with impunity certain aspects of the chief's personality or actions either by overt criticism or covertly by the omission of praise.⁵⁸

As with other art forms, no African state could ever entirely appropriate literature or orature, they could only force performers into various degrees of circumlocution and disguise.

A knowledge of this early literature and particularly of poetic literature is important, because the élite who wrote Amharinya and Kiswahili poetry were later to become the élite who wrote some of the earliest plays in their societies. The early Swahili and Amhara playwrights were certainly influenced by their literary heritage. Much Amhara drama, even into the Sixties, was written in poetic form and was heavily didactic, either preaching religious conformity or extolling the virtues of various Ethiopian emperors. The famous Swahili and Amhara playwrights, Ebrahim Hussein and Tsegaye Gebre-Medhin, are not only acknowledged masters of poetic language but have also used the techniques of *kufumba* and *samena worq* extensively in their writing to such a degree that both have been accused of obscurantism, and Hussein in particular has frequently been charged with intellectual élitism.

Feudalism and communalism

I am profoundly aware that this chapter leaves me open to charges of over-simplification, both because of space limitations and because of the sheer lack of information regarding many pre-colonial artistic forms. However, I do think that one can see clear differentiations between various forms and the uses to which the arts were put in communalist and feudal societies.

⁵⁷ Reidulf K. Molvaer, *Tradition and Change in Ethiopia: Social and Cultural Life as Reflected in Amharic Fictional Literature 1930–1974* (Leiden: Brill, 1980): Preface.

⁵⁸ *Izibongo: Zulu Praise-Poems*, ed. Trevor Cope (Oxford: Clarendon, 1968): 28.

In the communal society, because it is small and its members are heavily inter-dependent, performance art has the function of unifying and serving the whole community. Even where only a certain section of the people or an individual performs they identify themselves with the well-being of the whole. Some groups may be more equal than others, but the security of the community is always more important than the wishes of any constituent part of it.

In feudal societies the communal forms survived at village level, because the feudal hierarchy was often remote from the day-to-day life of the mass of the people. But, superimposed on top of these communalist forms, we see a new layer of performance arts, which served not everybody equally but primarily the twin pillars of authority, the church and the aristocracy.

Although these two were inter-dependent and derived legitimacy from each other, the artistic forms they appropriated were not the same. The Ethiopian church had its priestly dance, "*shibsheba*", musical forms peculiar to it and, like the Swahilis, religious poetry, both oral and literary, which conformed to unique rules. In the case of literature in particular the state found it useful to utilise some of these forms, but it also maintained performers to satisfy its separate demands and particularly to glorify its military aims. In less developed feudal situations such as those operating in the Ndebele state, there still existed mass participation, as in the great national war dances. However, as such states became increasingly differentiated, performers and artists specialised in particular art forms. Shona, Swahili and Amhara lords all maintained musicians whose prime purpose was to extol the lords' praises and glorify military prowess. The latter two also kept scribes and used literature for the same purpose.

The specialist artist was increasingly driven apart from his communalist brethren, until we reach an extreme amongst the Amharas where the *azmari* becomes an honoured pariah.⁵⁹ On some occasions, specialists such as the poets and priests could themselves be part of the élite, but in either case their function was no longer to serve the whole, unless indirectly in that the strength of the élite might reflect the strength of all. They became essentially the servants of God and the ruling class, alienated from the mass of the people by virtue of their exclusive skills.

In African states not only was there a multitude of different forms of artistic expression, but we also see, as I imagine could be seen in states at a similar level of organisation world-wide, how as classes developed, art, like all other instruments of power, began to be appropriated by hegemonic groups. To claim for Africa an idealised artistic world of educational integrated performance forms is to deny that

⁵⁹ Teclehaimanot Gebre-Selassie, in his *Brief Study of the Azmaris in Addis Ababa*, explains that *azmaris* could on occasion attain high administrative positions involving considerable wealth and power. Even in such a case, however, no respectable man would allow his daughter to marry into an *azmari* family.

Africa was home to a host of different forms of social organisation. The gulf between the feudal and communal worlds is only the most obvious of many gradations which lie between these extremes.



2

CONFORMITY, CHRISTIANITY AND SUPPRESSION THE EARLY COLONIAL THEATRE

THIS CHAPTER COVERS THE PERIOD from the 1890s, when Germany colonised what then became German East Africa, through to the late Fifties and Sixties, when theatre began to be used widely as a means of rousing people to take part in the struggle against colonial rule. Although, in all three nations concerned, imperial governments attempted to harness theatre to their own purposes, historical and political realities differed substantially. This was most notably the case in Ethiopia, where the imperialists were native Amharas rather than the Europeans typical of the rest of Africa. I will therefore analyse theatre development in each country separately, but it should be noted that in all three nations the colonisers used similar methods to promote cultural imperialism.

In each case the Christian church was used as an adjunct of the state to introduce colonial values, promote colonial culture and repress indigenous performance forms. In German East Africa (later Tanganyika) and Southern Rhodesia, the church was closely involved with education. Most early schools were run by missionaries, and these establishments worked to promote colonial cultural values. However, in Ethiopia, Western education came into conflict with indigenous Christianity, and the kind of theatre which was being introduced was consequently modified.

Western-style drama was in all cases the preserve of the educated élites, which had most contact with the colonialists and would in due course become the leaders of independent or, in the Ethiopian case, revolutionary states. Since this group was also highly vulnerable to the cultural indoctrination which led to traditional performance forms being castigated as pagan and uncivilised, their colonially inculcated values were to have a profound effect on the kinds of theatre promoted in the post-colonial period.

To varying degrees the élites were the prime object of policies aimed at cultural invasion – a concept which Paulo Freire explains as follows:

In this phenomenon, the invaders penetrate the cultural context of another group, and ignoring the potential of the latter, they impose their own view of the world upon those they invade and inhibit the creativity of the invaded by curbing their expression [...] invasion may be practised by a metropolitan society upon a dependent society, or it may be implicit in the domination of one class over another within the same society.¹

The new forms of drama were seldom employed for mass indoctrination – at least, not until the arrival of cinema and radio. Staged drama remained a largely urban-élite phenomenon. The European drama functioned as both an imperialist and a class tool. An appreciation of drama, as opposed to “*ngoma*” or other traditional forms, became a mark of one’s status as a modern, educated person.

This was but one aspect of the divide-and-rule policies carried out by the imperialists. Class was set against class, black against white, tribe against tribe, as colonial governments at various times actively encouraged the use of divisive tribal dancing or mutually unintelligible languages in order to stave off the threat of united nationalist movements. A brief review of how language has been used as a tool of repression, and the resultant problems for theatre practitioners, may be illustrative of some of the problems consequent on cultural invasion.

Language is a particularly sensitive issue in any discussion of African theatre. The question of literary and dramatic language has been a subject of debate ever since colonists first introduced extensive amounts of printed literature to the continent. Christian missionaries translated and printed the Bible into even tiny minority languages, but attitudes to publishing vernacular literature have often been conservative in the extreme. Dramatists have argued fiercely over whether writing in an international language such as English or French is acceptable, or whether one should write in the vernaculars of indigenous peoples.

In Ethiopia, where an established vernacular script has been in existence for many hundreds of years, the issue of what language to use for printing was never in doubt (except during the period of the Italian occupation in the 1930s). Once the break with the church language of Ge’ez had been made, Amharinya quickly established its dominance. Later, the only playwright to venture substantially into English would be Tsegaye Gebre-Medhin, and that was done to evade imperial censorship. English was and is spoken competently by a very small group. Most Ethiopian writers have remained firmly committed to producing work in Amharinya for their own community. This in itself, however, can be seen as an imperialist attitude, and has been much resented by Eritreans and other ethnic groups within the Empire who have seen their languages denigrated and have been forced to seek education and culture in an alien tongue.

In German East Africa, Kiswahili was the language of administration. However, after the First World War Britain took over what then became Tanganyika and Eng-

¹ Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972): 121–22.

lish became the language of education. Tanzania has a considerable number of very local languages, but the nationalist movement would quickly realise that multilingualism was potentially divisive. Since English was the language of oppression, and was moreover spoken only by a small élite, it was logical to promote Kiswahili, which was already in widespread use, as a *lingua franca*. This was made easy by the relatively weak ethnic associations of many Tanganyikans, and Kiswahili became a symbol of nationalism and the language of the arts.

In Southern Rhodesia, settler policy was to restrict publications in English, and to divide peoples by insisting that ethnic groups could only publish strictly censored materials, and only in their mother-tongue. In this case, the policy was seen by nationalists as a means of controlling the spread of ideas and of fostering ethnic divisions. In the post-independence period, English has become the medium of education, but Shona and Ndebele are still important indigenous languages, and the enforced imposition of any one of Zimbabwe's three major languages would be strongly resented. In recent years multilingual theatre, using two or three of the national tongues, has been pioneered in Zimbabwe in an attempt to confront the language problem and is proving highly successful with a wide range of audiences.

Sophisticated cultural manipulation characterises only the later stages of colonialism. In the early days, the tendency was simply to suppress as many manifestations as possible of local performance art, both because these were seen as a potential source of passing seditious messages and because traditional performance was often related to indigenous religion, to sexuality and to alcohol – all things which the Church strove to deny the African people. Moreover, traditional African culture must have been extremely frightening to many imperialists. They generally understood neither its language nor its form, and had been so indoctrinated in the “savage” nature of “primitive” Africa that a firelight *ngoma* may well have been transmuted in their eyes into a pagan ritual of frightening barbarity.²

The drama the imperialists sought to impose in place of traditional performance forms was in the naturalist style of late-nineteenth-century Europe. Drama was brought inside. School halls were built with proscenium arches and raised stages. The audience were formally divided from the actors, and that audience was the affluent minority who could afford to pay an entrance fee. With the introduction of the concept of “fourth wall” naturalism, theatre lost the democratic circle-form in which it was traditionally performed, and with the loss of dance and music much of its spectacular aspect was abandoned. Even where vernacular language was retained, drama ceased to be allusive and many-toned when appropriated by Chris-

² This was true even in Ethiopia, where I have heard Amharas expressing horror and contempt of “primitive” groups within the empire.

tianity to teach simple didactic messages. Essentially, the theatre was grounded, and became merely a prosaic form for the passing on of hegemonic doctrine.

Sadly, in many cases the colonialists succeeded so thoroughly in their attempts at cultural imperialism that the once-colonised may even now fail to recognise the depth of their indoctrination, as they wholeheartedly embrace, as symbols of development, the languages, clothing, and household items of the ex-colonial Western masters, and the aggressively consumerist values of pulp films and television. Traditional culture is often seen as inferior and even faintly embarrassing by post-colonial élites. As Ngugi wa Thiong'o argues:

The biggest weapon wielded and actually daily unleashed by imperialism against [...] collective defiance is the cultural bomb. The effect of a cultural bomb is to annihilate a people's belief in their names, in their languages, in their environment, in their heritage of struggle, in their unity, in their capacities and ultimately in themselves.³

Perhaps the greatest triumph of this bomb was that it exploded not with a bang but so insidiously that it overpowered many before they even realised they were engaged in a war.

The magnitude of the effect of cultural invasion varied among the states I am considering. In Ethiopia, many peripheral peoples have been relatively untouched by masters who practised indirect rule on the borders of their empire, but in the settler state of Southern Rhodesia traditional forms were so far eradicated that many of the old instruments are no longer played, the old rituals are forgotten, and many people no longer know their own dances, regarding their traditional performance forms as embarrassingly primitive. One of the sadder aspects of the colonial period, particularly in Rhodesia, was that the importance accorded to any form of cultural expression through performance art was greatly diminished. In the previous chapter I attempted to show how, for much of village Africa, traditional performance forms were involved in day-to-day life as an expression of village unity. However, in Europe by the nineteenth century, performance arts under capitalism had taken even further the fragmentation process that one can see beginning to occur in feudal African societies. European arts had separated into a series of rigidly delineated forms, as in the ballet, opera, music hall and drama, which were generally performed by specialists and attended only by small, class-based sections of society. In Europe few performance forms, with the exception of popular melodrama, were any longer capable of crossing class barriers and functioning as a source of cultural unification.

The Europeans who came to colonise Africa were in any case seldom of the cultured artistic group, which distanced itself from these "men of action." Although they were happy to put considerable effort into suppressing indigenous culture, the pioneers saw little need for promoting even European arts. The missionary teachers

³ Ngugi wa Thiong'o, *Decolonising the Mind* (London: James Currey, 1986): 3.

implemented drama for educational purposes, but otherwise theatre was seen as a purely entertaining luxury of no significance to the “real” business of running a colony. That this attitude was passed on to many European-educated Africans is apparent in the low level of importance post-colonial governments have generally attributed to culture. African governments commonly make speeches about how culture is central to identity and must be reclaimed by the people. They even set up ministries, or at least sections of ministries, devoted to culture. But when money is to be spent culture always comes last, and the idea that there might be any real role for art-forms to play in the development of a nation is quietly sidelined. Art in much of Africa has come to be seen as trivial, a game unworthy of serious people; artistic performance is frequently viewed as a socially demeaning activity.

The introduction to Africa of Western concepts of drama has had a profound impact on local performance cultures, and the conflict between old and new has led to great disquietude among contemporary African theatre practitioners. If we are ever to reconcile the two traditions it would seem to be of some importance to understand just how the conflict developed.

ETHIOPIA

*Amhara imperialism*⁴

The position of the Amharas as imperialists was markedly different from that of the Germans or English, for their empire was an extension of a home base, rather like the European Hapsburg state, as opposed to an overseas conquest in entirely alien surroundings. Amhara hegemony in Ethiopia dates back to the re-establishment of the Solomonic dynasty in 1270.⁵ However, in spite of long-standing enmity, the core of highland peoples in Ethiopia, the Amhara, Tigreans and Tigre, have extremely close cultural, political and historical links, and although they were

⁴ My historical information on the Amhara era of Ethiopian history is drawn mainly from the following works. For the early period up until the eighteenth century, Mordechai Abir's *Ethiopia and the Red Sea* was extremely useful, and for the next hundred years his *Ethiopia: The Era of the Princes* was my main source. On the rule of Emperor Menelik II, I referred to Harold Marcus's study in *Leadership in Eastern Africa: Six Political Biographies*, ed. Norman R. Bennett (Boston: Boston UP, 1968) and Chris Prouty's *Empress Taytu and Menelik II: Ethiopia 1883–1910* (London: Raven's Education and Development Services, 1986). There are many books on the period of Haile Selassie's rule, but the two I have drawn on most are Ryszard Kapuscinski's *The Emperor* (London: Quartet, 1978) and *Ethiopia: Anatomy of a Traditional Polity*, by J. Markakis (Oxford: Clarendon, 1974).

⁵ The Solomonic dynasty is supposedly able to trace its origins back to Menelik I, the illegitimate offspring of King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba. The Amharas took over from the originally Jewish Zagwe dynasty, which ruled from 1137 to 1270.

debarred from the throne, Tigrean and Tigre aristocrats wielded both enormous regional power and considerable weight at court. Until the fifteenth century these closely related groups made up the bulk of the Ethiopian empire, but from then onwards a combination of expansionist emperors, followed by Muslim and Oromo invasions in the sixteenth century, brought a host of new and culturally unrelated peoples into the state.⁶ At this time the Amharas seldom had an administrative machinery or army capable of more than exacting sporadic tribute from the peoples they claimed to rule. However, the situation was to change radically after 1855, when a usurper, Tewodros, seized power from the ineffectual puppet-empress Menen, and set about unifying a nation which for the previous hundred years had been run as a series of near-autonomous fiefdoms.

Tewodros committed suicide in 1868, but he left to his successors an empire in which the secular state exerted much more control over its constituents than it had ever done before breaking out of its highland enclave. It was on this inheritance that Emperor Menelik (1889–1913) built the Ethiopia that (with the exception of Eritrea)⁷ we know today. Menelik's campaigns expanded the size of the empire by over a third, and brought into its fold a host of southern- and western-lowland Bantu and Nilotic animists and Muslims, whose cultures bore very little resemblance to that of the Semitic, highland Christians. Menelik was the founder of a modern Ethiopian empire which now included some seventy ethnic groups, of which the Amharas were not even the largest, since they constituted only twenty to twenty-five percent of the population, while around fifty percent were Oromos.

The Amharas had little respect for the radically alien cultures over which they ruled, and which they tended to regard as savage in much the same mould as European colonists elsewhere in Africa. They were ruthless towards those who tried to resist their armies, massacring whole towns and seizing huge tracts of land for the benefit of Amhara settlers. In these areas, usually the most fertile and those with a moderate temperature – the highlanders abhorred the tropical and desert climates of much of the extreme south and west – Amhara influence was strong. Both the Orthodox church and the use of Amharinya were promoted. However, the Amharas have not usually cared actively to proselytise amongst subject peoples. Following the example of their Judaic ancestors, they have viewed themselves as a “chosen” people with an obligation to maintain their culture intact whilst using subject,

⁶ The Oromo, formerly often known as the Galla, were a pastoralist tribe which expanded northwards from the area around the Kenyan border.

⁷ Eritrea has had a varied history. It first became a unitary state when colonised by the Italians from 1890 to 1941. After a period of British stewardship the UN awarded Eritrea to Ethiopia under a federation agreement which was rapidly undermined by Haile Selassie. This led to a thirty-year independence struggle by the Eritreans, who gained formal sovereignty over their land in May 1993.

“inferior” ethnic groups as sources of tribute, regarding them as too primitive for inclusion within Orthodox Christian culture.⁸ Consequently, the Nilotes and Bantu were left to pursue their own cultural practices so long as these did not come into conflict with the interests of the master-race.

Menelik was not only a military leader. He was also a shrewd politician, determined to modernise his sprawling feudal empire, to bring in new administrative systems, and to curb the conservative power of the church. He had a profound admiration for many aspects of European technology and organisation, and he sought to break with many of the aristocratic taboos on labour and efficiency as well as with the xenophobia of the highland peoples. In the name of modernisation he was prepared to challenge any culture, including that of the Amharas. It was in Menelik’s time that the first European-oriented schools, staffed largely by the French, were opened in Addis Ababa, and with these were imported the teachers who would promote Western-style drama in years to come.

Possibly the most far-reaching piece of specifically cultural imperialism at this time was the promotion of the Amharinya language as the *lingua franca* and official tongue of the state. Amharinya had been accepted as the “*Lesana negus*” – the language of the king – as early as the thirteenth century, but it was Tewodros who had promoted the language as a national tongue. Menelik pursued the same aim, and it gradually became impossible to expect high government office unless one was an Amharinya speaker. There were in fact many Tigreans, Oromos and other minority ethnic representatives among the aristocracy and administration of the expanded Ethiopian empire. Although assimilation was not actively promoted, anyone who chose to speak Amharinya, adopt an Amhara name and life-style, and embrace the Orthodox church could fairly readily gain acceptance as a naturalised Amhara and reap the benefits of belonging to the hegemonic group. If one refused this course, one could expect little help from the state, and would remain in the position of an inferior vassal.

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⁸ Orthodox Ethiopians believe that the true Ark of the Covenant came back with Menelik I from Israel to Ethiopia, and that when the Jews refused to accept Christ, God followed the Ark and made the Ethiopians his new chosen people.

*The first plays*⁹

It was then to a vigorous feudal state that a form of Western theatre was introduced some time between 1916 and 1921. Tekle Hawariat, an Amhara aristocrat, was both playwright and director of the first drama brought to Ethiopia. His only play was called *Fabula: Yawreoch Commedia* (Fable: The Comedy of Animals), and was a satire based on the fables of La Fontaine. For his time Tekle Hawariat was a highly unusual man, largely because he spent some fifteen years of his early adulthood in Russia, England and France, and as a result had abandoned much of the insularity so typical of Amhara society. When he finally returned to his homeland in 1912 he was horrified by the corruption and machinations of the Ethiopian court, and by the lack of progressive thinking in science, technology and culture which prevailed among the people.

Although Menelik died only in 1913, a series of strokes had effectively incapacitated him from 1909. A bitter power-struggle then arose between the Emperor's designated heir, his grandson Lidj Iyasu, and Empress Taitu's daughter Zauditu, which the latter finally won in 1916. The struggle had exacerbated normal factionalism within the court, and Tekle Hawariat's play uses anthropomorphic animal characters to satirise the corruption and backwardness of the court élite. Neither the date nor the place of the performance are clear, but the play was apparently seen by a large court audience, including the now Empress Zauditu.¹⁰ She understood only too clearly the thinly veiled insults contained within the script, and promptly banned not only *Fabula* but all dramatic performances at court. So began a struggle over whether the function of theatre was to champion or criticise the state – a struggle which has continued in Ethiopia, and indeed to some degree in all the nations with which I am concerned, to the present day.

As I demonstrated in the previous chapter, pre-capitalist forms were seldom in open conflict with the values and beliefs of their societies. Where criticism was permitted it was either on specially licensed occasions as with the Shona post-harvest satirisation of chiefs, or was obliquely expressed as in Swahili techniques of

⁹ Very little has been published on Ethiopian drama, and much of that has been part of wider literary surveys. Prominent amongst such studies are Albert Gérard's *Four African Literatures: Xhosa, Sotho, Zulu, Amharic* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1971), Thomas Kane's *Ethiopian Literature in Amharic* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1975) and R.K. Molvaer's *Tradition and Change in Ethiopia*. My most useful unpublished sources on the early period of Amhara drama were Yimer Kifle's "A Thematic Analysis of the Works of Makonnen Endalkachew" (M.A. thesis, Addis Ababa University, 1981) and Abebe Kebede's senior paper for the Theatre Arts Department of the same university, "Actors in the History of Ethiopian Theatre" (1983).

¹⁰ Authorities differ on performance dates for *Fabula*. Options vary from between 1909 to 1921, but it seems to me that since Zauditu gave the banning order the play must have been shown after she came to the throne in 1916.

kufumba or Amhara *qene*. Nominally, Tekle Hawariat had maintained this oblique tradition by presenting his characters as animals in the well-known tradition of the story-teller. But unlike a subtle *qene* work, which requires a master to unravel its double-meaning, the anti-establishment message of *Fabula* was easily accessible to all its audience.

Interestingly, the playwright himself escaped without any punishment other than incurring the Empress's displeasure. This was probably owing to Tekle Hawariat's high rank, but it appears to have set a trend in Ethiopia, where playwrights, even when highly seditious, have earned only temporary demotion or, at worst, prison sentences of a few months. I will go further into the probable reasons for this relative lenience in an autocratic state in the following chapters; suffice it to point out here that it is a noteworthy contrast to the policies of nations such as Kenya and Malawi, where playwrights have either been entirely muzzled or have earned heavy prison sentences.¹¹

After Zauditu's ban on court theatre, drama was performed only in the few modern high schools of the capital. However, when she died in 1930, the Regent, Ras Tafari, assumed the throne as Haile Selassie I, and for his coronation commissioned a play, *Tequem Yallabet Chewata* (Vain Entertainment), from a school master at the Lycée Menelik II, Yoftahe Negussie.

Haile Selassie was a far more progressive figure than Zauditu. He had travelled widely in Europe during the years of his regency; he spoke fluent French and was acutely sensitive to foreign opinion regarding the development of Ethiopia. By assuming patronage of the drama from the very beginning of his reign, Haile Selassie asserted his role as an enlightened man of culture. More significantly for the long term development of drama in Ethiopia, the Emperor ensured that the theatre under imperial patronage would evolve, not as Tekle Hawariat's tool of dissent, but as a laudatory medium under the direct control of the crown.

From 1930 until the Italian invasion of 1936, the development of Amharinya drama was exclusively in the hands of two Lycée teachers, Yoftahe Negussie and Malaku Baggosaw, both of whom learnt their skills by assisting French teachers in the production of school plays. Five Amharinya plays were produced in this period – three of them by Yoftahe, all of which were commissioned by the Emperor for state occasions, and two by Malaku Baggosaw, which were performed at the Lycée Menelik. In 1934 this school acquired Ethiopia's first purpose-built theatre, described as follows by the journalist Ladislas Farago:

¹¹ In Kenya the prime example is Ngugi wa Thiong'o, who spent a year in detention without trial for his community theatre work. In Malawi, President Banda effectively drove underground all critical literature.

The Menelik school [...] possesses the only theatre in Abyssinia, a big zinc shed; and the pupils performed a folk piece in English for my benefit. We sat quite alone in the auditorium, and could only follow the play with difficulty, because the stage of this unusual theatre is not lit. Though the building is wired for electric light, there is no money for fuel to work the dynamo.¹²

One of Yoftahe's plays, written to celebrate the state visit of the Emperor's daughter after her marriage, appears to have been lost. His other two, *Tequem Yallabet Chewata* and *Yohod Amlaku Qetat* (The Punishment of Belly Worshipper), were both allegorical pieces which heaped flattery on the Emperor at the expense of his political opponents. These were court dramas in the tradition of the *azmari* praise-singer, but it was Malaku Baggosaw who produced the first plays for public consumption. *Talaku Dagna* (The Great Judge) was also strongly supportive of the Emperor, for it was a re-telling of the Solomon story on which Haile Selassie based his claim to the throne. The play was extremely popular and was performed at the Lycée twice a week for four months. However, for his second piece Malaku moved away from mythology and allegory and attempted Ethiopia's first realistic drama, *Zannabac* (Zannabac), which tells the highly moralistic tale of the eponymous heroine, a girl who suffers through the sexual promiscuity and pleasure-seeking life-style of her selfish mother.

Realism has no place in traditional Ethiopian culture, and fiction was still a very new concept at Haile Selassie's court. The first Amharinya novel, *Lebbwallad Tarik* (Imaginary Tale), by Afeworq Gebre, had been published only as recently as 1908. *Zannabac* appears to be far more the product of European influence than any of the preceding plays, and was correspondingly less popular with an audience that can have had few cultural reference-points by which to identify the piece.

The development of early Ethiopian drama raises issues of cultural neo-colonialism by Europeans within the wider context of Amhara domination over the Empire. Ethiopians have tended to differentiate sharply between drama, which is seen as a Western art form adopted by Ethiopia in the twentieth century, and traditional performance arts, and there has been little effort to integrate the two. Tekle Hawariat wrote *Fabula* as a riposte to a supposed "play," apparently a *kinet* type of variety show, to which he was taken at the Addis Ababa municipal hall. His preface to the play bemoaned the fact that Ethiopia had no theatre in the European sense which he believed to constitute "proper" drama.

Certainly Ethiopian playwrights readily adopted what they saw as the rules of this new form. Plays were to be performed in end-stage theatre halls, dramatic dialogue completely replaced traditional theatre forms of dance and music, the play was divided into acts and scenes and had a nominally realistic form. Adherence to these concepts of what makes a play has changed little throughout the century. However, in opposition to the way in which drama developed in nations colonised

¹² Ladislav Farago, *Abyssinia on the Eve* (London: Putnam, 1935): 170.

by Europe, it is important to note that the form was never directly imposed on the Amharas, but was, rather, introduced by indigenous members of the upper class who had been in contact with the West. The language-issue is vital here. From its first introduction, nearly all drama in Ethiopia was written and performed in Amharinya. Foreign teachers seldom spoke local languages, and their influence over how drama developed was therefore largely limited to the externals of formal presentation.

Drama, as seen in Ethiopia, is radically different from the traditional performance forms of the people. I would argue, however, that this divorce was primarily not to do with a Western wish for cultural invasion of Ethiopia. Rather, it was the choice of the Amhara aristocracy and a comprador group, who appropriated drama as a modern alternative to the traditional high value the upper classes put on the development of poetic and rhetorical skills. They used the form to promote imperial Orthodox values and to function as an élite, exclusive performance mode.

Although most Ethiopians would argue that this drama falls within the tradition of the Western naturalism from which it was adapted, it is my contention that Amharinya plays have been highly modified to suit indigenous culture. Because drama developed in a relatively isolated environment, and within the context of a strong cultural tradition, it has acquired many facets which are uniquely Ethiopian. This development is paralleled by the way in which the Ethiopian Orthodox Church lies within the realm of Christianity, but manifests itself in a particular indigenous manner which has rendered that church profoundly alien to many of the more mainstream strands of the Christian world.

Already in *Fabula* we see the appropriation of story-telling techniques through the use of symbolic characters, and elements of disguise common to *qene*. We also see the emergence of the aristocratic playwright/director who rules absolutely over his actors. In all of these early plays, the performers were children. In the early Thirties, the plays of Yoftahe Negussie and Malaku Baggosaw were performed by schoolboys from the Lycée, who took on both male and female roles, as it would have been a social disgrace for girls to flaunt themselves in the arena of public performance. The European teachers were also probably unaware of the extent to which acting was regarded as a disgrace for the upper-class boys who made up the bulk of the school's population. As one of these students explained: "The students were doing the performances in fear of their teachers. Even though there were voluntary students, some of them were forced."¹³

For the boys, to act was tantamount to being an *azmari* and resulted in a massive loss of face. Schoolboys were used in these productions because they were one of the few literate groups available; from the beginning it was the script, rather than action, which was considered of central importance in Amhara drama. In a society

¹³ Abebe Kebede, "Actors in the History of Ethiopian Theatre," 7.

where the ideal was to cultivate dignity by minimising movement, but where rhetorical skill was highly prestigious, it is not surprising that serious drama developed as an oratorical rather than an active art. This bias was obvious even to foreign observers. The Italian Lanfranco Ricci witnessed an early Ethiopian play and commented:

In this theatrical production, the stage action was rudimentary if not non-existent, the characters two-dimensional symbols of collective nouns designating a class or social type or ethical concepts for names, not of those of real people. All the force of the play is concentrated in the vivacity of the dialogue.¹⁴

In Amhara drama, the actor has generally been seen as of much less consequence than the writer/director. Praise and honour are reserved for the playwright who has created the all-important rhetoric.

Ethiopian drama has been heavily dominated by church art-forms – hence the symbolic characters, the preference for allegorical tales, and the strongly moralistic and didactic flavour of the early plays. It would take until the Sixties before playwrights began to challenge either the purpose of drama as being to uphold the status quo or the dominance of symbolic modes of representation. Even now, many of the structures and thought-processes behind early Ethiopian drama continue to have a strong hold over contemporary practitioners.

The Italian occupation and after

The Italian occupation of Ethiopia from 1936 to 1941 put a halt to all cultural development. Books were burnt, schools closed and vernacular cultural production heavily censored as Mussolini sought to set up an apartheid-based colony. Fortunately such colonisation was unsustainable in the face of Allied intervention after the outbreak of the Second World War, and in 1941 Haile Selassie resumed his throne amidst an outburst of nationalistic artistic endeavour.

The threat of the Italian invasion had given rise to what would later become Ethiopia's first professional theatre company. In 1935 a government official, Makonnen Hapte-Wold, had brought together a group of *azmaris* as "The Ethiopian National Patriotic Association." For several months they gave open-air performances of *kinet*, music and short propaganda plays to inspire the citizens of Addis Ababa to the defence of the motherland. As we shall see below, liberation struggles are frequent catalysts for the development of new, relevant cultural manifestations as the people assert their identity in the face of invasion. Many writers on African liberation struggles have recognised the importance of this role for culture, beginning with Frantz Fanon, who contended that "to fight for national culture means in the first place to fight for the liberation of the nation, that material keystone which

¹⁴ Lanfranco Ricci, *Letteratura dell'Etiopia* (Como, 1969).

makes the building of a culture possible.”¹⁵ In 1942 the Patriotic Association was re-formed as a professional group, “Ye Ager Fikir Mahber Theatre” (The Love of the Country Theatre Association; see also the theatre-building, Fig. 10). The actors of this company were not schoolboys but professional *azmaris* who performed variety-style shows which combined traditional *kinet* and short improvised plays for the benefit of a largely *petit-bourgeois*, as opposed to court, audience.

In this development we see another strand in the emerging Ethiopian drama tradition. The critical/satiric drama had been crushed at birth, to be replaced by a specifically court theatre. However, the court constituted too small an audience to sustain professional groups, so when drama sought to expand it had to widen its scope and provide performances compatible with more populist traditional art. For many years *kinet* was the staple of the populist theatre. The Ager Fikir had for the first time created an ensemble of *azmaris* and now set out to collect traditional dances from many different ethnic groups to entertain Addis Ababa’s heterogeneous population. Official approval for the display of dances from minority ethnic groups was the first (and still largely the only) way in which the Amharas have given credence to cultures within the Empire other than their own.

Drama was far less popular than *kinet*. The Ager Fikir put on brief, usually comic pieces, with heavy emphasis on buffoonery. Scripts were presented to the actors, who were largely illiterate, in scenario form, and the cast then improvised around a theme. Even so, the plays had to be put on before the *kinet*, for *kinet* was what attracted an audience, which would leave early if the programme order were reversed. Only in the late Forties were attempts made to recruit literate professional actors so that scripted plays could be performed. The premier writer of early populist drama was Iyoel Yohannes, who joined the Ager Fikir as a child actor, and in the course of a long career produced over seventy scripts, most of which, because they were not viewed as “literature,” have been lost. Because theatre audiences were limited there was a constant demand for new scripts. Lack of rehearsal time meant that direction was minimal. Usually the *azmari* actors were left to adapt their traditional jesting skills to the demands of the stage.

Gradually theatre audiences grew. In 1946/47 Yoftahe Negussie formed a new City Hall company in conjunction with the Addis Ababa municipality, and although this group too earned its bread and butter through *kinet* and comedy, it did occasionally perform serious drama. The most prestigious theatre in Ethiopia was built during this period. In 1955 Haile Selassie decided that he wanted a theatre for his Silver Jubilee celebrations. He appropriated the plans of the City Hall, which had been seeking new premises. The building of the fourteen-hundred-seat Haile Selassie I Theatre was then rushed through in a mere four months, on the foundations of

¹⁵ Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1967): 187.

an unfinished Italian cinema hall which had more recently seen service as a huge public urinal.

Finally there were attempts to move theatre out of the capital. The Ager Fikir undertook some short provincial tours in the late Forties. In 1953/54, the director of these, Mathewos Bekele, set up a touring company, "*Yeandnet Theater Kifil*" (United Theatre Company). Conditions were strenuous for the actors, who often slept rough, were continually on the move, and had to improvise set and scenery, so that the company lasted only a few years before reuniting with Ager Fikir. However, it had been proved that there was an audience for drama outside the capital.

While the populist *azmari* theatre grew, literary drama followed its own, largely separate, course of development. The re-establishment of the monarchy had led to a surge of Amhara nationalism, and Haile Selassie sought to combine this with his drive towards modernisation, at least for the élite.¹⁶ In the cultural sphere, education was expanded, new printing presses were set up, and a whole new generation of authors emerged.

Literature was still the preserve of the upper classes. Indeed the post-liberation period sees both play- and novel-writing almost exclusively in the hands of the aristocracy. Foremost among, and typical of, the aristocratic playwrights was the prime minister, Ras-Bitwodedd (Prince-Beloved) Makonnen Endalkachew. Like most of his peers, Makonnen Endalkachew had received elements of both church and modern state education, but his concept of the boundaries between different types of literature appears to have been extremely vague. It is often difficult to decide whether to designate early modern Amharinya literature as novel or as drama, for dialogue and description are frequently mixed together. Even when the drama form is adhered to reasonably firmly, concepts of dramatic tension or the time limits imposed by performance constraints are frequently ignored. Thomas Kane comments with some disdain:

Most authors are so ignorant of the art of drama writing that stage directions are not separated from the dialogue and in one case have even been put into rhyme. Plays of twelve and thirteen acts are known.¹⁷

Unlike the ephemeral populist plays, these works were written as dramatic literature. Even the best-known playwrights of the period, such as Makonnen Endalkachew and Kebede Mikael, never saw all their plays performed. Whether these were played

¹⁶ Haile Selassie wished to be thought of as a development-oriented monarch. Yet at the same time he sought to maintain autocratic control of his empire. The result was that the vast majority lived a traditional, feudal life, whilst a few members of the élite and some urban dwellers gained access to limited modern facilities as a result of projects aimed at giving Ethiopia a superficially modern appearance.

¹⁷ Thomas L. Kane, *Ethiopian Literature in Amharic*, 21.

at court, at the Lycée, or later at the City Hall and Haile Selassie I theatres, the runs were generally only for a few days.

The aristocratic writers tended to view the new instruments of drama- and novel-writing as weapons for promoting the old Orthodox values of patriotism, conservatism and, above all, conformity with the dictates of the Church. In this they adhered to church traditions which viewed art not as a source of entertainment but as an educational tool. The extreme conservatism of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church led it to view almost any innovation in any sphere with extreme distrust. Satiric or comic drama could never been countenanced. Only a theatre which led to meditations on the glory of God and the insignificance of man would be supported by the immensely powerful ecclesiastical establishment.

Makonnen Endalkachew was a devout Christian, and his work demonstrates the close ties between church and state at the apex of Ethiopian society. His plays were all about ruling élites, such as the Biblical King David in *Dawitna Orion* (David and Orion), the Ethiopian King Dawit III in *Salisawi Darwit*, the Empress Taytu Bettul in *Taytu Bettul*, and the head of the Ethiopian Church, the Abuna Petros,¹⁸ in *Yedam Dems* (The Voice of Blood).¹⁹ However, in every case God is far more important than any human being. Humility, obedience and repentance are the values these plays preach, and they are written largely in the form of dialogue sermons. Characterisation and human pity are minimal. The playwright's prime concerns are the over-arching glory of God and the ever-present threat of damnation. The Ethiopian Orthodox church has a particularly negative outlook on life. Man is seen as inherently sinful and appallingly weak. Any distraction from God is evil – to such an extent that in *Salisawi Darwit* the king's son dies mainly from sorrow at his father's love of secular music.

Although Makonnen Endalkachew was the supreme exponent of the sermon play he was by no means alone. *Teqem Yallabbet Chewata* was an allegorical version of the parable of the wise and foolish virgins, while *Talaku Dagna* similarly united praise of the Solomonic line with religious sentiment in recounting the Solomon myth. The semi-divine nature of the Ethiopian monarch led in court drama to a persistent concentration on religious and imperial themes.

¹⁸ Abuna Petros was the head of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church at the time of the Italian invasion. His refusal to collaborate with the enemy and consequent execution feature both in *Yedam Dems* and in a later work by Tsegaye Gebre-Medhin, *Petros Yachin Saat*.

¹⁹ Makonnen Endalkachew, *Salaswi Dawit* [King David III] (Addis Ababa: Berhanena Selam Press, 1955); Makonnen Endalkachew, *Yedam Dems* [The Voice of Blood] (Addis Ababa: Berhanena Selam Press, 1947); Makonnen Endalkachew, *Dawitna Orion* [David and Orion] (Addis Ababa: Berhanena Selam Press); and *Taytu Bettul*, both in *Arimugne* [Correct Me] (Addis Ababa: Berhanena Selam Press, 1954/55).

The vast majority of early literary drama, when not taken from religious myth, was based on history, for several reasons: there was no tradition of fictional representation in élite cultural forms; the Amhara hegemonic group had a strong awareness of past imperial glories; and Haile Selassie's autocratic style of government would not countenance any criticism of his rule. It was, therefore, safer to eulogise the imperial past, which cast reflected glory on to the person of the Emperor and avoided the risk of earning his displeasure by commenting on the present in a way which he might construe as being derogatory.

Thus we find plays about the ancient monarchs: *Kaleb* (Caleb) and *Achab* (Achab), were both written by Kebede Mikael, though never performed; the myth of the Queen of Sheba inspired Assaber Gebre-Hiwot's *Yenegesta Azab Tarikawi Guzo* (The Historical Journey of the Queen of Sheba). Understandably, most popular of all historical themes was the Italian invasion, which provided material for six plays in the Forties and Fifties. These ranged from the already-mentioned *Yedam Dems*, about the execution of the Abuna Petros by the Italian general Graziani, through to the first play written by an Ethiopian woman, Seneddu Gebru's *Yetiopia Hazb Nafqot* (The Longing of the Ethiopian People). Written in 1949/50, this play also featured Graziani. It told in rhymed verse of the horrendous massacre of Ethiopians in Addis Ababa which was ordered by the Italian in reprisal for an attempt on his life. Possibly the most extraordinary piece of all about the Italian adventure was *Haile Mariam Mamo* (Haile Mariam Mamo), a thirteen-act play accompanied by an essay about the eponymous guerrilla patriot hero by Te'ezagu Haylu.²⁰

Amongst the historical plays, two stand out as particularly worthy of notice: *Tewodros*, by Germachew Tekle-Hawariat, and Kebede Mikael's *Hannibal* were not only extremely popular but were, significantly, among the very few plays of the Forties and Fifties which ventured any criticism of imperial rule.²¹ In both cases the criticism was of necessity oblique. *Tewodros*, in verse form and six acts, eulogised the nineteenth-century Emperor as a unifying force and the first moderniser of the Ethiopian state. This in itself was not exceptional, as Tewodros is widely revered as a national hero; but his position is ambiguous, in that he was a usurper, outside the

²⁰ *Kaleb* and *Achab* were written in 1965/66 and 1967/68 respectively. Assaber Gebre-Hiwot's *Yenegesta Azab Tarikawi Guzo* [The Historical Journey of the Queen of Sheba] was published in 1958/59, and Berhanu Denge's *Nigist Saba* [The Queen of Sheba] was published in 1959. The six plays dealing with the Italian occupation were Makonnen Endalkachew's *Yedam Dems*; Seneddu Gebru's *Yetiopia Hazb Nafqot* [The Longing of the Ethiopian People] (1949/50); Yesowa Worq Haylu's *Nesannet Kebre* [Independence is My Honour] (1954/55); Assaber Gebre-Hiwot's *Yekidane-Qual Theatre* [Drama of the Covenant] (1955/56); Te'ezagu Haylu's *Haile Mariam Mamo* (1956/57); and Ateneh Alemu's *Zerai Deress* (1955/56). All of these titles were published in Addis Ababa by Berhanena Selam Press.

²¹ Germachew Tekle-Hawariat, *Tewodros* (Addis Ababa, 1949/50), Kebede Mikael, *Hannibal* (Addis Ababa, 1955/56).

sacred Solomonic line of descent. Since he was not related to Haile Selassie, he could not reflect glory on the person of the present Emperor, and to praise such a man might be viewed as implying that insurrection was, under certain circumstances, desirable. Moreover, the favourable attention paid to his desire for wholesale change within the body politic was not infrequently interpreted as a criticism of Haile Selassie's underlying conservatism.

Kebede Mikael has been described by the critic Albert Gérard as Ethiopia's "first modern playwright."²² Certainly his *Hannibal* is considerably more compact than the bulk of early Amhara drama. It tells the story of Hannibal, who is viewed as an African hero opposed to the European threat from Rome. The ultimate defeat of Hannibal and the Carthaginians results from divisive power-mongering and factionalism within the Carthaginian court and heralds the onset of European domination of the African continent. The play is highly unusual, in that it emphasises the need for pan-Africanism at a time when the Amharas tended to see themselves as isolated from, and superior to, the majority of Africans. More daringly still, Carthage is obviously a metaphor for Ethiopia, and the portrayal of the weaknesses of the self-centred court is a thinly disguised criticism of the Ethiopian aristocracy.

The final category of plays I wish to discuss here are the purely fictional works produced before the late Fifties. Apart from *Zannabac*, I have found only two of these. One is again by Kebede Mikael, *Yeketat Maebal* (The Storm of Retribution),²³ while the other is by Daniachew Worku, a man better known as a novelist, whose only play, *Sow Alle Bayye* (Thinking There Is A Man), was written in 1957/58. Both are moral, cautionary tales with a conservative message. In contrast to *Hannibal*, *Yeketat Maebal* is a study in xenophobia. It tells of an Ethiopian youth who returns from abroad after contracting the dangerous disease of liberalism. He supports a group of poor young men who eventually turn on their benefactor and murder him. Abroad is seen as a place which corrupts youth, threatens the social order, and ultimately leads to anarchy. The depressing message that people will betray those who seek to help them is also integral to *Sow Alle Bayye*. Here, two friends become outcasts when faithful Bilellin follows the criminal Gizaw into exile. However, when both men fall in love with the same woman, Gizaw turns on his companion and tries to poison him before repenting and committing suicide. Once more the man who trusts is a fool, and human nature is shown to be inherently evil.

Much of this early play-writing must be viewed as experimental. The majority of authors produced only one play while also working at the novel or polemical forms. To write "modern" literature was regarded as an élite fashion, patronised

²² Albert Gérard, *Four African Literatures*, 281.

²³ Kebede Mikael, *Yeketat Maebal* [The Storm of Retribution] (Addis Ababa: Berhanena Selam Press, 1948/49).

by Haile Selassie so long as it promoted traditional values. Only Makonnen Endalkachew and Kebede Mikael were serious dramatists, and even their writing was fitted in around the commitments of senior government posts.²⁴

What is important in this period is that two dramatic traditions emerged. For the élite, the tragic and heroic forms were appropriated as most fitting to the dignity of church and state. *Qene* was incorporated in the verse form of much of the early drama, and it was the literary, didactic aspect which was regarded as of prime importance. All of these plays were written in Amharinya and, even when critical of the incumbent government, envisaged no fundamental change in imperial rule. The theatre of the urban masses, by contrast, was dominated by the *azmaris* and was improvisational, physical, and predominantly comic. Although dance and drama were seen as separate art forms they could and did share the same stage, and although the *azmaris* performed in Amharinya the culture of the other ethnic groups did receive some attention via the medium of *kinet*.

TANGANYIKA

*Formation and colonisation*²⁵

Tanzania came into being only in 1964, when the independent governments of Zanzibar and Tanganyika agreed to unite. Prior to this period, although the islands (of Zanzibar and Pemba, which make up the state of Zanzibar) were frequently closely allied with Swahili coastal towns, and on occasion made claim to the Tanganyika littoral, the governance of the two areas was in separate hands.

As an independent Swahili trading-nation, the island of Zanzibar reached its apogee between the tenth and fifteenth centuries; with the arrival of Vasco da Gama at Mombasa in 1498, Swahili independence was at an end. The Portuguese sacked many of the rich coastal and island towns, and their domination, which was maintained until 1699, devastated Swahili economies. By the late seventeenth century the weakening Portuguese were no longer able to maintain their empire and the Omanis took over colonial rule on Zanzibar. The Swahilis did attempt sporadic resistance, but because the city-states were always divided amongst themselves they were never able to throw off their oppressors permanently. Under Omani rule, Islam re-

²⁴ Makonnen Endalkachew was Prime Minister and Kebede Mikael Minister of Education for many years.

²⁵ My main sources on early Tanzanian history are John Iliffe's *A Modern History of Tanganyika*, Hugh Stephens' *The Political Transformation of Tanganyika; 1920-67* (New York: Praeger, 1968), and *A History of Tanzania*, ed. I.N. Kimambo & A.J. Temu (Nairobi: East African Publishing House, 1969).

vived, and there was a blossoming of Kiswahili literature, which at that time was written in Arabic script. Many Omanis came to live among the Swahili, especially on Zanzibar, which emerged as a sultanate made rich initially through the slave and ivory trades and later through the establishment of extensive clove plantations.

During the early nineteenth century the Europeans extended their influence over the Indian Ocean, and they were not willing to see an Arab empire in control of the abundant East African trade. They therefore established commercial posts on Zanzibar and further stimulated trade, which gradually pushed its way far into the mainland interior, taking Islam, the Kiswahili language and major cultural upheaval to the many hundreds of thousands of people involved in both the slave and portage trades. Iliffe makes the following claim:

During the nineteenth century Tanganyika's inland peoples made contact with the outside world through a long-distance trading system based on Zanzibar, which became a satellite of Europe's growing power in the Indian Ocean, Tanganyika experienced a transformation more intense than any other region of tropical Africa at that time. It is the essential background to the colonial period.²⁶

The exposure to foreign influences and upheaval in traditional ways of life varied greatly according to how near to a major trade route any one ethnic group was located; but for many – perhaps the majority – living in Tanganyika, the old self-sufficient life-style was coming to an end. Culturally it was the Swahili influence which predominated, for most of the traders were Arabs or Swahilis, and it was to the Swahili coast that all the trade routes ultimately led. However, the porters also picked up the *ngomas* and music of many of the areas they passed through and so spread various performance forms up and down the country.

By the late nineteenth century European missionaries were also following the trade routes, bringing both the Christian religion and their imperial aspirations to Tanganyika. The British had established dominance over the Sultan of Zanzibar by 1890, and some wished to extend their rule to the interior, but it was the German adventurer Carl Peters who stepped in first and persuaded a somewhat reluctant Kaiser to annex the territory in 1885. Apart from missionaries and administrators, the German presence was initially small. Iliffe says that by 1898 there were fewer than a thousand Germans in German East Africa, only a tiny minority of whom had come as settlers. However, after adopting the colony, the home government was under some pressure to develop it. A nationwide, extremely harsh civil service was set up, with Kiswahili (now written in Roman script) adopted as the official colonial language. Many Africans were forced to labour for plantation owners or the colonial government in order to pay a mandatory hut tax and so entered for the first time into a capitalist economy. In the 1890s and 1900s railways were built connecting the

²⁶ Iliffe, *A Modern History of Tanganyika*, 40.

coast with the trade routes and major agricultural settlement areas in the north, while from 1892 the Germans started to set up a secular Swahili school system, which by 1911 had resulted in eighty-three schools, a total far larger than that reached by most British, Portuguese or Belgian colonies at the time.

The Germans had highly developed theories of racial superiority which placed black Africans lowest on the scale of humanity. They therefore had little compunction in enforcing what amounted to slave labour in many areas. It was this excessive harshness which led to the Maji-Maji wars of 1905–1907 in the south-east of the colony, when for the first time Tanganyikans of different ethnic groups came together to fight a common oppressor. The uprising was savagely suppressed as the Germans destroyed both people and crops, and it has been estimated that up to three hundred thousand people, a third of the region's population, died as a result of the reprisals or of subsequent famine.

In the years that followed, up until the outbreak of the First World War, local people mounted little further resistance. With international war, vast numbers of people were dragged off to act as porters. The German military leader, Von Lettow-Vorbeck, conducted a brilliant guerrilla campaign throughout Tanganyika and into surrounding territories against far superior Allied forces. Both sides treated the indigenous people appallingly, and their estimated hundred thousand deaths from disease, malnutrition and overwork were considered insignificant.

Von Lettow-Vorbeck was never beaten in the field, and surrendered in Salisbury, Southern Rhodesia, only after Germany had admitted defeat. Administration of the colony was then handed over to the League of Nations, which gave what are now Rwanda and Burundi to Belgium, a small section of the extreme south to Portuguese Mozambique, and the bulk of the country as a mandated territory to Britain, which then renamed the area Tanganyika.

After the First World War Britain had been left weakened but in control of huge areas of the world. As a mandated territory, Tanganyika was in trust to Britain, which was expected to lead it towards self-government under the aegis of the League of Nations (and later the United Nations). Although the country had some minerals these were relatively insignificant resources compared to the amounts present in South Africa and the two Rhodesias. Good agricultural land was limited, and it had in any case been decided by Whitehall that, unlike Kenya or Southern Rhodesia, Tanganyika would remain a black man's country and white settlers would be discouraged. All these factors meant that Britain had relatively little interest in Tanganyika, the "poor man" of East Africa. During much of their period of colonial domination the British practised indirect rule as developed in Nigeria, whereby local chiefs (and where there were no traditional chiefs they were created) governed under European guidance. The colonisers also excused themselves from any but the most minimal requirements for economic, political or cultural development until

United Nations tours of inspection prompted some improvements as the Fifties saw the run-up to independence.

Throughout this period Zanzibar was also in British hands, although it was ruled through the Arab client-élite, who owned nearly all the land and wealth of the islands. The British claimed that their main interest in Zanzibar was to put an end to the Arab slave trade, but the islands were always significant as trading posts and constituted links in the British marine network. Although slavery was formally ended in 1897, the British allowed internal Arab hegemony to remain intact, leaving most Africans as near serfs labouring on the huge clove plantations which created Zanzibar's wealth in the first half of the twentieth century.

*The development of indigenous theatre forms*²⁷

Like Ethiopia, Tanganyika developed a two-sided theatre tradition following the introduction of European drama techniques (in this case, mostly by missionaries, who ran most of the schools). However, in Tanganyika it was the informal sector of indigenous performers who showed most vigour in adapting performance forms, whereas formal Western-style drama was for the most part restricted to simple didactic pieces mounted by churches or schools, or to the European productions presented by the expatriate community.

The reasons for the differences in theatrical development relate to two factors: the movement caused by trade; and the conditions of colonialism. Whereas in Ethiopia it was generally only the Amharas who moved in the course of their imperialist expansion, in Tanganyika huge numbers of people from many different ethnic groups were involved in portage, and were therefore exposed to a variety of cultural influences. Iliffe says that this human traffic resulted in two apparently contradictory cultural manifestations. On the one hand, the only loosely grouped bulk of Tanganyikan clans began to feel the need to identify themselves with a certain tribe, while they were designated by travellers as belonging to particular ethnic groups which had never previously been clearly differentiated. This in turn led to the development of *ngomas* which were identified with particular peoples and became a part of their specific culture. When, later, members of these ethnic groups came to the towns, particularly to the capital, Dar es Salaam, dancing *ngomas* with people from one's home area became a means of preserving identity and assuaging

²⁷ My main sources on theatre in Tanganyika during the colonial period were; Ebrahim Hussein, "On the Development of Theatre in East Africa" (doctoral dissertation, Humboldt University, 1974); the first chapter of Amandina Limhamba's doctoral dissertation, "Politics and Theatre in Tanzania after the Arusha Declaration 1967-1984"; T.O. Ranger's *Dance and Society in Eastern Africa 1890-1970: The Beni Ngoma* (London: Heinemann, 1976); and Phillip Donner's paper, "Music Forms in Tanzania and their Socio-Economic Base" (*Jipemoyo* 3, Motala, 1980): 3.

loneliness and nostalgia in an alien society. On the other hand, the impact of the new cultural forms could hardly fail to have an influence on people from the interior of Tanganyika, particularly when these forms originated from more "modern" or sophisticated groups, which in the Tanganyikan context meant either the colonists or the Swahili.

Some of my conclusions regarding the development of indigenous performance forms may well be open to question. Except where these were a part of upper-class culture, art forms have gone largely unrecorded, and *ngoma*, with which I am most concerned here, was in all three of the societies that I have researched increasingly a peasant and lower-class form. I have already demonstrated how this was the case in Ethiopia, but Jan Knappert says that Swahili society, too, saw *ngoma* as a lower-class activity and identified with paganism as a form for the only superficially Islamised.²⁸

Amhara culture did modify the cultural forms of some Ethiopian ethnic minorities, but the extent to which this occurred is impossible to verify in the absence of any data. In Zimbabwe we know that the settler-state quashed and denigrated traditional forms until they were marginalised almost out of existence. In Tanganyika, however, it appears that the mixture of extensive indigenous movement and the relative lenience of British indirect rule allowed a blossoming of dance cultures in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This is not to say that either the Germans or British were complacent about indigenous culture. Both to varying degrees discouraged or forbade traditional performances, usually on the grounds that these were pagan or led to tribal divisiveness. However, in both cases the colonial presence was thinly scattered, and it was simply not possible to monitor or suppress the bulk of performances.

Undoubtedly the best-recorded of the dance forms which flourished and mutated under colonial rule is the "*Beni ngoma*," which is the subject of T.O. Ranger's *Dance and Society in Eastern Africa 1890-1970*. *Beni* waxed and waned over the period of colonial rule and was apparently to a degree a means of rationalising and dealing with that phenomena. Yet *Beni* grew out of an old Swahili tradition of competitive dancing troupes which were organised on a strictly hierarchical basis, and which constantly adopted innovations both from Arabs and from slaves arriving from the interior. The militarisation of these troupes, which resulted in the specific *Beni* (band) form, drew first on the military band of the Sultan of Zanzibar and later on those of the British and Germans, but it was a continuation of the on-going process of change.

²⁸ See Jan Knappert, "Swahili Poetry," in *Introduction to African Literature*, ed. Ulli Beier (London: Longman, 1967): 41-49.

The re-creation of *Beni* which I saw in 1988, as performed by the staff of the Bagamoyo College of Arts, was clearly related to European military bands. The dancers wore uniform and danced with trumpets, drums and kazoos. The form of the dance was based on a witty elaboration of military drill, with an officer who led the troupe commanding the steps via a tin whistle.

Beni originated in Mombasa in the 1890s, but reached its peak of elaborateness as a specifically Swahili dance around 1910, when two groups, the "Kingi" and "Scotchi," emerged as rivals who held weekly parades through the streets. The troupes had both male and female contingents and operated under the aegis of a rich patron, who might spend a small fortune on ensuring that his troupe was the most smartly turned out and resplendent.

The dance reached Tanganyika through the influence of the Swahili and the presence of Tanganyikan "askaris,"²⁹ who had seen service in the First World War and brought the new dance back home with them to impress their peers. *Beni* was never as elaborate in Tanganyika as it had been among the rich coastal communities of Kenyan Swahilis, but it spread far more widely throughout the country. The rival groups in Tanganyika were the "Marini" and "Arnioti," with the Marini as the more upper-class Swahiliised grouping, while the Arnioti had a broader-based membership. A significant fact about *Beni* was that it was always identified with Kiswahili, and the songs which accompanied the dance were always in that language. As Kiswahili became the modern *lingua franca* of Tanganyika, *Beni* followed in its wake as a symbol of the dancers' relative sophistication.

Ranger claims that the *Beni ngoma* was by no means a mere imitation of the colonialists. Originally, missionaries had promoted European-style marching bands, mostly among freed slaves, to offset the "wicked" influence of African drums. But *Beni* evolved independently of direct white teaching, and was frequently distrusted by whites. The British often thought it was too Germanic, and also expressed fear of the dancers' suspected identification with the Islamic Swahili. However, what they especially disliked was the high level of social organisation demonstrated by the dance, and the fact that the Marini and Arnioti established branches across Tanganyika which had close links and functioned as mutual-aid societies. To a degree British distrust was justified, for the welfare functions of the early *Beni* societies were precursors of the earliest political association: the Tanganyika Territory African Civil Services Association, formed in 1929, was initially seen as a dance and social club as much as a political organisation.

So what was the function of *Beni*? It appears to have been largely an assertion of the dancers' modernity, and of a cosmopolitan as opposed to purely local or ethnic sense of identity. Ranger feels that a part of *Beni*'s role was to define and compre-

²⁹ *Askari* is Kiswahili for soldier. The term was widely adopted by the British in East Africa.

hend colonial reality within an African context, but more and more it became a source of self-help and prestige for the small sector of "modern" Tanganyikans who wished to differentiate themselves from the old world and claim some role in organising the new.

Fundamentally *Beni* societies were not pantomimes of white power nor protest movements against it. They were above all concerned with the survival, success and reputation of their members, acting as welfare societies, as sources of prestige, as suppliers of skills.³⁰

Beni was infinitely adaptable. It not only changed its songs frequently to comment on new areas of social concern, but as it spread as far as Northern Rhodesia, Nyasaland and the Congo it became so Africanised that Ranger says the related "*mganda*" dance of Malawi is now seen as a purely local form. In the towns, *Beni* remained a strong source of group rivalry which later extended to a sporting connection which is in force to the present day. Ranger again: "At one point in the progression it would no doubt have been more accurate to write of each dance association having its own football team rather than the other way round."³¹ However, in rural areas rivalry tended to be between different villages, and here *Beni* was the dance of the young, who in some cases abandoned traditional *ngomas* and asserted through their dance the changing style of society in opposition to the increasingly powerless will of their elders.

It is important that, relatively early on, the British managed to remove most élite Africans from direct involvement in *Beni* by strongly discouraging all those in government employ from having anything to do with the dance. This affected enrolment in the clubs, which led to them becoming from the Twenties largely a forum for the urban masses, ex-soldiers and porters. The élite set up new clubs, such as the African Association, which still had an important dance and social role, but which were more easily transformed into political pressure groups when the time for concerted political action came in the mid-Fifties.

If *Beni* was the most widespread and powerful of the new supra-tribal cultural forms, it was not the only one. Various dances emerged in response to changing realities under colonial rule. "*Bom*" was possibly related to *Beni* but was an imitation of specifically German military drill, while "*Robota*" was a dance which emerged on the early sisal plantations and imitated the process of sisal collection. Urban life also spawned a variety of dances. "*Leleman*" was a dance of urban, "emancipated" women, who formed *leleman* societies which were often involved in spiritual healing. Increasing class differentiation led not only to the formation of rival *Beni* groups but also to dances with specific class affiliations. The "*ngoma ya kihuni*" or

³⁰ Ranger, *Dance and Society in Eastern Africa 1890-1970*, 75.

³¹ Ranger, *Dance and Society in Eastern Africa 1890-1970*, 99.

"hooligan's dance society" was a form of association set up by lower-class immigrants on the coast. "*Chapaulinge*" was adopted by the middle range of modern workers, clerks, teachers and domestic servants, while later the élite adopted "*Dansi*," an adaptation of European ballroom dancing.³²

So we see that groups removed from their traditional societies reacted in different ways. Many looked to the future and organised cultural events which interpreted changing realities and allied the dancers with new class structures, as opposed to the old ethnic affiliations of traditional society. To achieve this, many elements of European dance and music were appropriated, but not in a spirit of pure imitation. Rather, these were identified with modernity and were fused with traditional African forms to create new entities. In 1954 fifty-eight African dance societies were registered in Dar es Salaam. Most were modern, but at least six were specifically ethnic and reflected another reaction to change, the desire to maintain identity through links with an earlier form of organisation, the tribe or ethnic group.³³

None of this should lead to an assumption that traditional dances were rapidly falling out of favour. In most areas older and "modern" dances co-existed, fulfilling different needs. However, even traditional forms of dance and music in some cases mutated significantly to reflect new realities, particularly the weakening of the status of elders and the new importance of an economy based on capitalistic competition. Iliffe explains this change among the previously feudal and hierarchical Kerewe:

Whereas each group in nineteenth century Ukerewe had monopolised specific musical forms and instruments, the colonial period untuned the string of degree [...]. Dance groups "*bangoma*" multiplied, each with its eye-catching mascot and fame-hungry lead singer judged by originality rather than musical skill, each using magic to trounce its rivals, each performing to hitherto forbidden drums. Ceremony changed into entertainment, ascribed status into public competition, regalia into ornament, ritual into magic. Four forces were at work. Colonial rule made all things small, reducing the significance of status in the Kerewe hierarchy and opening Ukerewe to the competitive dance traditions of Usukuma. Cotton-growing enabled individuals to earn wealth regardless of their social status, and yet left time for dancing. Christianity undermined parental control. And the chief [...] patronised the *bangoma* [...]. Around Lake Victoria men who were young in this period remembered the intensely competitive era of the dance in which they first displayed their talents. Yet *bangoma* did not destroy Kerewe society. Rather, they reintegrated it, weakening distinctions between Sese aristocrats, Jita commoners, Kara labourers and Ruri slaves. When intermarriage started in the 1930s, a distinct Kerewe people began to emerge. While conservatives bewailed irreligion and disorder, a new society took shape on the dancing fields of Nansio.³⁴

³² My information on colonial dance other than *Beni* comes mostly from Iliffe, *History of Tanganyika*, and from Philip Donner, *Music Forms in Tanzania and Their Socio-Economic Base*.

³³ See Iliffe, *A History of Tanganyika*, 391.

³⁴ See Iliffe, *A History of Tanganyika*, 26.

The final indigenous performance form I wish to consider here is the music of "*taraab*." The precise origins of *taraab* are unclear, but it appears to have come from Zanzibar around the turn of the century as a form of choral music combining Arab and Asian musical styles.³⁵ *Taraab* was popularised in the inter-war years as an East African form mainly thanks to the voice of its prime exponent, the Zanzibari woman singer, Siti Binti Said, who combined it with the humorous dramatic form of "*vichekesho*" (see below). *Taraab* is identified with Islamic urban society, and its most important use was originally at Muslim weddings. The singer is often sexually explicit, particularly more recently as *taraab* singers have become increasingly in demand for secular concerts. They may also comment, often mockingly, on political and social issues.

The heterogeneous Zanzibari and Tanganyikan people, possibly because few of them lived in strong feudal societies which could fight off outside influences, appear to have had a particular talent for incorporating elements of foreign cultures and adapting them into new, relevant and supra-ethnic forms. As I demonstrate below, this happened even with cultural forms which the British tried to introduce as specifically Christian and European.

Colonial cultural forms

The British colonial government discouraged performance forms it viewed as threatening by introducing a range of measures varying from outright bans to forbidding government and church employees from taking part in certain dances and imposing licensing fees on dance societies. Through their missionary cohorts, the government also promoted imitative European forms in schools and churches.

I have already mentioned the brass bands of the freed slaves, which the missionaries encouraged to counter traditional music forms. These never achieved any great popularity, possibly because the instruments required were expensive and had to be imported from abroad. But the simplified form of "*bandi*" using tin whistles and local drums was widely taken up by schools; Donner says that "musical skills acquired in bands have been transferred to the wind sections of dance bands."³⁶ Choir music was rapidly taken up as Kiswahilised "*kwaya*" and became popular not only in churches but among many schools, clubs and state institutions. *Kwaya* flourishes to the present day (see Fig. 15). Again these groups often developed competitively. They were uniformed, sang part-songs either unaccompanied or to xylo-

³⁵ It has been particularly difficult to find information on Zanzibari performance forms. However, on the subject of *taraab*, I have been told that while the melodic and harmonic structures are related to Arab musical forms, the rhythmic element is purely African.

³⁶ Donner, *Music Forms in Tanzania*, 92.

phones and drums, and incorporated rhythmic movements, though of a rather more restrained variety than those common to traditional *ngoma*.

The colonisers had an ambivalent attitude to "*dansi*." Tanganyikans saw it as a specifically Christian, élite dance-form, for *dansi* was associated with ballroom dancing and band music promoted by the Christian educators. Donner says that *dansi* was originally promoted by the colonists and performed in colonial welfare centres and hotels in the Thirties. However, as with other cultural imports, the more the local people adapted the form to their requirements, the more the imperialists distrusted it. *Dansi* took over from *Beni* among the élite, but it borrowed the idea of club rivalry and set up "New Generation Clubs" led by "kings" and "queens" who deliberately organised performances on the same days in order to see who could attract the bigger crowd. By the Fifties *dansi* was also incorporating non-British foreign music, especially Latin-American jazz, and this was viewed as unwholesomely internationalist by the British government.

It is important to take into account a major change in official attitudes to indigenous cultures which took place in British colonies in the late Forties, and was largely determined by the Cambridge Summer Conference of 1948, which met to determine how the quality of life could be improved for the colonised. In a reversal of previous policy, the Colonial Office decided that traditional culture should be promoted for purely entertainment purposes, and put aside £120 million towards that goal. The hidden rationale for this decision was the rise of the spirit of nationalism, most forceful at that time on the Indian sub-continent, but slowly spreading to the African colonies. Whereas before the colonialists' aim had been to create a unified Christian culture to overcome ethnic allegiances, with the rise of nationalistic feeling, particularly amongst educated élites, it was felt that the old policy should be reversed. Tribalism was to be encouraged in order to divide nationalist movements. Modern supra-tribal cultural manifestations such as *Beni* and *dansi* were therefore discouraged, and in their place secularised, competitive, ethnic *ngomas* were promoted. Henceforth it was such *ngomas* that were publicly performed to celebrate Empire Day, agricultural shows and the visits of dignitaries.

Drama

The early history of drama in Tanganyika is bound up with the history of education, for it was only in schools and the mission churches often attached to them that drama was promoted to the glory of God and the English language. Although the Germans were relatively energetic in promoting education, I have been able to find no information regarding German or German-Kiswahili plays.

By 1913 the Germans had school places for an estimated nine percent of Tanganyikan schoolchildren, but by 1947 the British had only managed to raise this to ten

percent, and there was only one secondary school in the entire colony, at Tabora, which graduated twenty-five students per year. The British used English as the medium of education, and all drama except for simple religious pieces was performed in English. This explains why so few plays were produced and why the drama was seldom adapted to indigenous purposes in the pre-independence period.

Drama was apparently introduced to Tanganyikan schools in the Twenties. Hussein lists various one-act plays which were performed in 1922 at the all-white St Joseph's Convent School – among them A.A. Milne's *The Ugly Duckling*, Gow's *The Sheriff's Kitchen* and Mokinnel's *The Bishop's Candlesticks*; Asian schools were apparently treated to a similar diet.

All schooling was racially segregated. The British schools mounted productions for parents' days and, from the Forties onwards, Asian schools started to put on specifically Asian plays. Drama seems to have been practically non-existent in African schools until the Forties, and it was then performed in English only to a tiny élite.

The first record of Kiswahili plays comes from the Ndande Mission, which translated and distributed such religious and morally improving works as *Bwana Amekufa* (The Lord is Dead), and *Wanawali Wenge Akili* (Intelligent Girls). The first tour of a Kiswahili play also occurred in the Forties, when one Mr Morris, a lawyer, formed a troupe to tour East Africa with colonial government backing, performing a Molière play in translation. Only the classics and morally improving drama were endorsed for vernacular entertainment by the British colonial government.

Other than these few examples, it seems that drama in African Tanganyikan schools was used purely as a medium for teaching the English language. Hussein claims that by 1952 most schools put on some form of English drama, usually either a version of a Bible story or excerpts from set texts that the children were required to study. The colonists maintained strict controls over the materials dramatised – indeed, over all printed matter. Hussein says that “drama was seen throughout this period as most of the constitutions of drama clubs in schools show – as a tool for mastering English pronunciation, diction and language.”³⁷ Given this instrumentalisation of drama, it is hardly surprising that for the mass of Tanganyikans the form remained profoundly alien. Of all performance arts, drama seems to have been the form over which the colonialists maintained tightest control. As a consequence, drama in Tanzania would have a hard battle in the coming years to be accepted as a relevant form for popular entertainment.

There is, however, one form of drama which gained a wider popular audience. “*Vichekesho*,” which can be roughly translated as “things which are ridiculous,” has obscure origins, but it appears to have been linked with *taraab* around the turn of the century in Zanzibar, and was initially often sung. *Vichekesho* is a slapstick-comedy

³⁷ Hussein, “On the Development of Theatre in East Africa,” 47.

form which usually provokes laughter at the antics of a “fall guy.” It was possibly related to trickster stories, for the clever man is contrasted with a fool who is made to suffer for his stupidity.

Under British influence *vichekesho* was adapted to reinforce messages about the stupidity of “backward” Africans in contrast to the educated Christian élite. The form was related to popular slapstick films such as those featuring Charlie Chaplin or Laurel and Hardy, which were widely shown in the British African colonies, and were considered by the authorities to be suitable entertainment for Africans. Later, specifically African films were made in *vichekesho* style in many British colonies, including Tanzania and Zimbabwe. Almost invariably, it is the rural African who is shown making a fool of himself when he comes to town or encounters a modern situation. *Vichekesho* skits were widely performed in African schools, and they encouraged students to look down upon illiterate, rural, and non-Christian people. The form was and has remained popular, and in contemporary Africa the humour has been turned against corrupt politicians, members of the *WaBenzi*,³⁸ and other social undesirables. However, the patronising use of *vichekesho* in the colonial period also led to a reaction against reliance on humour in much post-independence intellectual drama; as a consequence, comedy of any kind appears to have become politically suspect among Tanzanian socialist playwrights.

SOUTHERN RHODESIA

*Colonisation: from 1890 to 1965*³⁹

The colonisation of Southern Rhodesia was to prove both more racially and culturally oppressive and more long-lasting than colonialism almost anywhere else on the African continent. The crucial difference between the Rhodesian situation and that of either Ethiopia or Tanzania was the fact that, from the very beginning, Southern Rhodesia was planned as a settler-state. British culture was therefore strongly propagated, while indigenous beliefs and customs were correspondingly denigrated and suppressed. The result has been that contemporary Zimbabweans have in many

³⁸ *WaBenzi* literally means “of the tribe of Mercedes Benz drivers.” The Mercedes is widespread prestige symbol in Africa, and to be called a *WaBenzi* is a common insult applied to the rich.

³⁹ Most of my information on Zimbabwean early history comes from D.N. Beach’s two works cited in the previous chapter, from *Zimbabwe’s Inheritance*, ed. Colin Stoneman (London: Macmillan, 1981), and from Stanlake Samkange, *Origins of Rhodesia* (1968; London: Heinemann, 1973) and *Turmoil and Tenacity*, ed. Canaan S. Banana.

cases retained only the most vestigial forms of traditional culture and have often accepted many elements of the set of values promoted by the Western colonisers.

Prior to 1840 Zimbabwe had been a largely Shona area, but from the beginning of the nineteenth century the region was subject to successive waves of the "*mfecane*," the process which sent waves of southern tribes trekking northwards as white men invaded South Africa. All passed through Shona country until, in the 1840s, the Ndebele attacked, defeated the last major Shona state of the Changamire Rozvi, and established themselves in the southern part of what is now Zimbabwe. Over neighbouring areas, the Ndebele enforced the payment of tribute from some Shona and consolidated their dominant position.

Europeans had been interested in this region of Southern Africa from as early as the sixteenth century, when the Portuguese first entered the area as traders. By 1652 the growing Portuguese community had so exploited local civil wars that they were able to make the previously strong Shona Mutapa state subject to the King of Portugal. Individual Portuguese then seized huge land-holdings, set up private armies, and stole cattle, mines and slaves.

Portuguese colonisation was brutal but informal, and numbers of resident Portuguese were never large enough to have much cultural influence over the indigenous population. By the time of the partitioning of Africa among European states in 1884, the home Portuguese government was no longer strong. In response to a British ultimatum in 1890, the border between Southern Rhodesia and Mozambique was established. The Portuguese consequently lost both their power and much of their land to the new British state.

The prizes the European colonisers sought were land and gold, but the British might never have seized the area were it not for the burning ambition of Cecil Rhodes to establish a British presence from the Cape to Cairo. Rhodes was a British parson's son who travelled to South Africa for his health and made a fortune there in diamonds. In the 1880s he determined to move into Shona and Ndebele areas, and as a result of dubious negotiations with the Ndebele king, Lobengula, he finally won a concession in 1888 allowing him to mine in certain areas. On the basis of this treaty Rhodes recruited a two-hundred-strong "Pioneer Column" which marched into Mashonaland and hoisted the Union Jack in Fort Salisbury (now the capital, Harare). In 1893 Matabeleland was invaded, the Ndebele were defeated, and Rhodes's British South Africa Company set up its rule under royal charter over the whole area.

"Charter" law now operated in the territory named Southern Rhodesia, and mining and land claims were distributed wholesale to white settlers. Upwards of a half of the total land area was eventually seized and given to whites who, as in Tanganyika, imposed taxes on the indigenous population in order to force them into the capitalist economy as agricultural labourers and miners.

In 1923 government was transferred from the Company to the settlers, and Southern Rhodesia became a crown colony with "responsible government" under the control of the whites.⁴⁰ An effectively apartheid state was now in operation, with Africans given inferior land and education and barred by law from many skilled jobs.

African reformist political groups began to operate after the First World War and became increasingly vocal after 1934 with the establishment of the African National Congress. Misheck Sibanda explains the process of early African politicisation as follows:

With the establishment of the colonial political economy, the African people were on the whole united as a result of the common experience of proletarianisation and marginalisation. This was expressed through the various phases of their reaction to colonial and settler domination: first through backward-looking rural protest movements of the 1890s; second through forward-looking reformist political and workers' protest movements of the 1920s; and third through radical and "mass" pressure groups of the 1930s, 1940s and early 1950s.⁴¹

The white landowners who maintained control of government throughout this period could afford to espouse relatively moderate racism, but by the Sixties the bulk of the two hundred and twenty thousand whites who ruled over nearly two and a half million blacks were the skilled and semi-skilled workers who had most to lose from African advancement. In 1962 they voted Ian Smith's intensely racist Rhodesia Front into power.

Under Smith the settler population put increasing pressure on Whitehall to grant full independence. British conditions for improvement of African status prior to handing over full power were not particularly onerous, but the Rhodesia Front was unable to compromise sufficiently to meet them, and the conflict resulted at the end of 1965 in Ian Smith's "Unilateral Declaration of Independence" or UDI.

*The repression of indigenous culture*⁴²

There is little information available on just how the settlers effected an obliteration of traditional cultures so complete that many local instruments became obsolete, rituals were often abandoned, and Ndebele cultural practices in particular were all

⁴⁰ "Responsible Government" gave control over most internal affairs to a settler government, but left Whitehall specified reserve powers.

⁴¹ *Turmoil and Tenacity*, 47.

⁴² Cultural information on repression of indigenous performance forms is hard to come by. My most useful sources were Ndaizureyi Mutisi's *Dramatic Performances in Shona*, and Silas Tavarangana's manuscript of his M.A. thesis on Shona drama, which he kindly allowed me to consult before it was completed.

but forgotten. Only in the years since independence has the study of non-European culture been officially promoted. What does seem extraordinary is how pervasive the success of cultural invasion was. Even in South Africa, which has been subject to a longer and more intensely racist brand of oppression, local cultures found ways to survive and adapt far more successfully than in Southern Rhodesia.

As in every African colony, the church and government worked hand-in-hand to effect cultural suppression. Ndaizureyi Mutisi puts the motives for this policy succinctly: "The missionaries discouraged the traditional Shona theatre, for they viewed it as against Christianity, while the government then discouraged it as a force against social progress."⁴³ Missionary activity in Southern Rhodesia was widespread and had the declared aim of not modifying but completely expunging African rituals and "medicine." The missionaries forbade all "primitive" dances and managed to embody some of their edicts in the law, as with the 1899 Witchcraft Suppression Act, which explicitly banned the "*mande*" dance. The bigotry of many missionaries towards African culture is exemplified by the following quotation from one Father Gruber, a missionary, artist and architect, who as late as 1949 was able to say that he "didn't think there was any African art per se [...] African art, if any exists, is bound to attempt to copy European art and culture."⁴⁴ Although Christianity never entirely eradicated Shona and Ndebele allegiance to widespread spirit-cults, most people accepted nominal Christianity and many became fervent followers of the Christian Church, which allied itself with "progress" and modernity and looked down on the rituals and culture of "backward" traditional Africans.

I think it is important here to take into consideration the undermining of confidence in selfhood and culture which occurs so frequently among conquered peoples. Not only had the Shona and Ndebele been colonised, but when they attempted widespread rebellion in the first "*chimurenga*" (liberation struggle) of 1893-97 they were crushed with great brutality. The example of this heritage may have meant that traditional ways were frequently seen as the ways of defeat, while progress was equated with modernisation and imitation of the white man's culture.

Promoting a new theatre

Indoctrination was carried out not only through the suppression of the old ways: missionaries also sought through education to inculcate colonialist and Christian values. Different mission societies divided the country amongst themselves and by 1924 were running one thousand two hundred and sixteen mission schools for

⁴³ Ndaizureyi Mutisi, *Dramatic Performances in Shona*, 7.

⁴⁴ Stephen Peet, *Report of the Visit to the Range, Fort Victoria, the Gutu Reserve*, March 1949 (Central African Film Unit, File No. F268-269).

seventy-seven thousand black pupils. Government education for blacks was almost non-existent, although it was the state which dictated racist education policies.

From early on, most instruction was given in English, a stratagem which automatically began the process of dividing modern Christians from the traditional peasantry. Originally, drama had been performed in the vernacular in many churches, as a simple means of transmitting Bible stories, but the schools quickly switched to English. As in Tanganyika, the drama taught was largely a matter of textbook English and tended to specialise in crudely naturalistic productions of European classics. Drama was rapidly established as a part of English education, and Mutisi argues that vernacular productions were by contrast seen as inferior. The only record I have of a school continuing to use Shona for drama was the Kutama Mission; but even there, all material was religious. Shona and Ndebele were used by churches for proselytising purposes, but the establishment of vernacular church drama groups would have to wait until the Sixties.

I have found little evidence in Rhodesia (in contrast to Tanganyika) of white forms being adapted to African usage, although this impression may be partly attributable to lack of readily available information. Mutisi does mention that in the period after the Second World War up until the Sixties two new forms flourished: "*makonzati*" (concerts) and "*matiipati*" (tea-parties). The notion of the concert was probably adapted from the example of the concerts commonly given at school Open Days, where performances of music and religious plays were offered alongside dramatised readings of poetry and well-known speeches. Of the *matiipati*, Mutisi says: "At a 'tea-party' everything was expected except the tea."⁴⁵ These were heavily influenced by returning migrant workers, especially those who had been employed as miners in sophisticated South Africa. Apparently imitations of Johannesburg life were common, and for the élite there was dancing to music from the "*giramafoni*." What is notable here is just how little information or indication of thriving cultural forms among blacks exists in the early colonial period. Only with the rise of liberation politics would the importance of indigenous cultural forms re-assert itself.

White theatre

While African performance forms were being actively discouraged, white theatre in Southern Rhodesia flourished. The colony was not unusual in setting up amateur white theatre clubs. In Dar es Salaam and Arusha in Tanganyika, "Little Theatres" were built for white residents (cf Fig. 23), and in Kenya and Uganda there were several more. Amateur dramatics were a common amusement for expatriates and

⁴⁵ Mutisi, *Dramatic Performances in Shona*, 9.

colonists, usually producing a variety of operetta, music hall and West-End favourites in an effort to re-create the ambience of "home" in what was considered to be the African cultural desert.

White drama came to Southern Rhodesia with the Pioneer Column. C.T.C. Taylor's history of early white theatre mentions that a Sergeant-Major Flemming King nurtured a desire to play Hamlet, and applied in June 1890 for permission to open a theatre in Fort Salisbury with a two-year monopoly and a liquor licence. Permission was refused on the grounds that the application was premature, and there is no evidence that the Sergeant-Major ever fulfilled his longing to play the Danish Prince. However, only two weeks after the Pioneers arrived in Salisbury there is mention of an all-male cast performing an unidentified farce.⁴⁶

By the mid-1890s several amateur dramatic societies had been formed, based in the two main towns of Bulawayo and Salisbury. Their entertainments were supplemented by tours of professional groups from South Africa and Britain. Demand was such that in 1911 an eight-hundred-seat theatre, "The Palace," was built in Salisbury, and "The Electraceum" opened a year later. Magicians, acrobats, singers and actors all toured Southern Rhodesia during this period, and "light" entertainment was definitely the preferred form. However, by the Thirties some of the local élite wished to put on more serious drama, and so formed what remains Zimbabwe's premier amateur theatre, the "Reps," or "Salisbury Repertory Players." Over the years, thanks to a judicious mixture of light comedy, British classics and popular hits, societies like Reps have blossomed and built private theatre clubs with excellent facilities in all the main towns.

In 1947 the national Institute of Allied Arts was founded to promote the "Little Theatre" movement, while in 1958 annual theatre festivals were instituted, with adjudicators often brought in from abroad. White schools promoted similar types of drama and set up their own annual competitions.

All this activity was purely amateur. Colonial governments have always looked upon their possessions as sites for the extraction of wealth, and have therefore regarded the provision of services to any sector of the community as a low priority. Moreover, the colonial view of life was anti-aesthetic. Pioneering values were practical, aggressively masculine, and utilitarian. White artists in Southern Rhodesia have tended to view themselves as flowers doomed to bloom unseen in a cultural desert. Plays such as Neil Jardine's *Colour the Rabbits Blue* (Salisbury, 1965) and Hazel Beauclare's *The Studio* (Salisbury, 1976) feature an artist struggling in a philistine environment, as indeed do better-known works like Doris Lessing's novel *Martha Quest*.

⁴⁶ See C.T.C. Taylor, *A History of Rhodesian Entertainment 1890-1930* (Salisbury, 1968) for most of my information on early white Rhodesian theatre.

Amateur theatre was largely a matter of providing entertainment, not art, though groups were often led by a small clique which saw itself as specifically artistic. Robert Cary, who wrote a history of Reps, makes it clear that class was a factor in amateur drama, and at least in its first years Reps was very much the home of upper-class Salisbury white society.⁴⁷ Amateur drama was also a way of insulating oneself from Africa and nostalgically re-creating a bourgeois European haven. I tend to agree with Preben Kaarsholm's observation:

In the main, theatre in Rhodesia was a playground which allowed whites to confirm themselves communally in a sense of cultural pseudo-aristocracy as well as to have fun, momentarily, in a sealed-off, non-African vacuum.⁴⁸

White Rhodesian plays

Although almost the entire performance programme of white amateur drama consisted of European plays, a small body of local white playwrights began work from the early part of this century. Most playscripts appeared in small journals and were never performed, although by the Sixties a few writers did have their plays produced.

Play-writing was a minor activity compared to the "hundreds of novels and poems written by whites in the country who attempted in various ways to mythologise the colony as the new Arcadia or El Dorado."⁴⁹ Play-writing never seems to have had this function. A bibliography of Rhodesian literature in English by J. Pichanick lists only thirteen published plays prior to UDI, all written by whites.⁵⁰ The heroism of fighting men, fear of black uprising, and mockery and hatred of outsiders who fail to understand the tough realities of Rhodesian settler life are the main themes of the early plays. Arthur Cripps's *The Black Christ* (Oxford, 1901) is the only piece which does not have an essentially racist outlook. Some writers were unable even to contemplate the Rhodesian situation. William Fitzsimmons' appallingly sentimental *Crimson Clover* (Salisbury, 1946) contains two maudlin, moralistic pieces, *Glen to Glen*, which examines the plight of a sensitive young RAF pilot with wrecked nerves, and *The Shadow on the Road*, which treats the Irish evils of nagging women and drink. Racial fear, a recurrent theme, is at its most overt in Wilfred Bussy's *Rung Up*, published in the *Police Review* in 1913. This short radio drama

⁴⁷ Robert Cary, *The Story of Reps* (Salisbury, 1975): ch. 1.

⁴⁸ Preben Kaarsholm, "Mental Colonization or Catharsis? Theatre, Democracy and Cultural Struggle from Rhodesia to Zimbabwe," unpublished paper: 6.

⁴⁹ T.O. McLoughlin, *The Writing of East and Central Africa*, ed. G.D. Killam (London: Heinemann, 1985).

⁵⁰ See J. Pichanick, A.J. Chennells & L.B. Rix, *Rhodesian Literature in English: A Bibliography 1890-1974/5* (Gwelo: Mambo, 1977).

tells of a woman and child, isolated on a rural farm, who are attacked for no apparent reason by a black "impi."⁵¹ The woman is instructed over the telephone by her husband to kill herself rather than be raped. However, in Rhodesian literature settlerdom could not ultimately be defeated by black "barbarians," and so we learn that a posse arrives in the nick of time and saves both wife and child. Typically, the black horde has no motive for its attack. The myth of settler heroism depended largely on inciting a constant fear of attack, although, in reality, after the 1890's rebellions Southern Rhodesia was peaceful for nearly seventy years. Time and again we also see that the symbol for white fear is the white woman. Her menfolk must be ever vigilant protectors of defenceless femininity, and the underlying fear of rape is a clarion call to white solidarity.

Lo Bengula by "Bundu" in *Outpost* (1941), Howard Gott's *Pioneers* (1933) and Constance Fripp's *Souls and Gold* (1937) are all historical pieces in the pageant tradition. They glorify settler bravery, although the odd semi-noble savage is allowed to make an appearance, for the British have often displayed a sentimental weakness for warrior tribes like Zulu, Ndebele and Masai.

The final strand in Rhodesian dramatic thought is highlighted in *On The Frontier of an Empire* by "The Young Recruit," which was serialised in the *Police Review* (1911-12). This five-act farce mocks its anti-hero, Aubrey Beaumont, an effete, aristocratic Englishman who arrives in the rough, tough world of Southern Rhodesia and uses his rank to gain position over the salt-of-the-earth settlers who have pioneered their way in a savage land. Various farcical situations arise until Aubrey finally gets his come-uppance and is eaten by lions. The inverted snobbery of the colonist who resents the interfering ignorance of soft upper-class Englishmen is a strong trait in Rhodesian thought.

White heroism, racial fear and the superiority of the Rhodesian over metropolitan whites are themes which combine in the apparently more sympathetic, and certainly more sophisticated, plays of Jack Watson, *Sikelele Afrika* (Salisbury, 1963) and *Poison the Sun* (Salisbury, 1964).

Watson was writing at the time when black nationalists began the armed struggle which would lead to independence. His belief that the struggle was being led by agitators assisted by British left-wingers (who were a minority endangering the infinitely slow process of civilising the still barbaric black masses), was common amongst middle-class whites. His moral stance is expressed in the preface to *Poison the Sun*:

"Poison the Sun" was completed a few months ago at a time of unbridled intimidation and gangster politics. Thousands of little people, incapable of hitting back or too scared to try, lived in a nightmare of fear and uncertainty. Many Africans, too, without neces-

⁵¹ "Impi" was the name given to a Zulu or Ndebele regiment.

sarily having much stomach for violence, did believe in the slogans and promises of the relevant political bosses.

So "Poison the Sun" was completed against a background of mounting confusion, terror and petrol bombs. It is a tribute to the courage of the non-European artists in tonight's cast, that they accepted their parts at precisely the time when the terror was at its height [...]

An intimidator is a damn swine in any language, whether he is strutting around Europe with a swastika armband and mouthing anti-Semitic obscenities, or whether – 20 years later – he is hurling petrol bombs into small houses in Central Africa.⁵²

Both plays work on the basis of introducing a white who initially appears to be a racial bigot. Jim Brandon, in *Poison the Sun*, is a South African who, along with the stereotypically Italian Giuseppe and a black assistant, Tom, has worked for years in the bush building dams. Brandon is portrayed as a woman-hating racist, who refuses to allow women into his camp and casually abuses blacks as a matter of course. Similarly, in *Sikelele Afrika*, Simpson and Fraser are the District Native Commissioner and his assistant, who rule over a large black reserve. Fraser refers paternalistically to his retainer, Togo, as a "damned old rascal,"⁵³ and mocks the British M.P. who has come out to investigate the state of Rhodesia, saying that, like all left-wingers, he will not even try to understand the political realities of the country but will go home and write a lengthy, distorted but prestigious report.

White liberals appear in both plays. In *Poison the Sun*, a nurse, Stella, and her doctor husband come to deal with a smallpox outbreak, and in *Sikelele Afrika* there are the British M.P. Fulton, and Fraser's new wife, Mary, who used to be Fulton's secretary. These whites are shocked at the bigotry of the Brandon and Fraser ilk and are therefore drawn into sympathy with radical black agitators, Sikala in the former play and Molemo in the latter. It is at this point that the plays turn. For in both cases the black agitators who appeared so reasonable turn out to be cowardly manipulators of their own people. In order to stop work on the dam, Sikala tells black workers that a smallpox vaccination will make them sterile. As a result, they refuse treatment and many die. Molemo mistranslates a speech by Fulton on the native reserve in such an inflammatory manner that the people riot and attack a mission station where Mrs Simpson has been working.

The mass of blacks are portrayed as little more than child-like savages – a white man's burden, easily manipulated against their own interests. This attitude is exemplified in the following dialogue:

SIMPSON Can't you get it into your head that these people aren't just backward Europeans. They're Africans – and most of them very raw ones. Something totally different.

⁵² Jack Watson, *Poison the Sun* (Salisbury, 1964), Preface: 3.

⁵³ Jack Watson, *Sikelele Afrika* (Salisbury, 1963), Act 1, scene i.

FULTON They're still human beings.

SIMPSON Yes, they are – but human beings with a completely different mental structure. Slowly we are trying to do something about it –

FULTON Damn slowly!

SIMPSON Because there's no other way. There are good qualities in these chaps – their patience and stoicism and their extraordinary ability to conjure happiness out of virtually nothing. Those are the things we'd like to preserve along with other qualities. But there's plenty we've got to eliminate and replace with something else. Some of them are evolving, getting a bit closer to us. They're growing up if you like. But they're a tiny handful.⁵⁴

The few who are “growing up” are represented by the university graduates, Tom and Togo's son David, for whom we learn that Fraser has for many years sacrificed marriage prospects in order to pay for the African's medical training. These “moderates” finally turn on the false radicals, expose them as cowards and traitors, quell the riots, and in Tom's case actually kill the false leader who has caused so much suffering.

The philosophy behind these plays is one of racist paternalism with a strong underlying streak of sentimentality. The heroes are tough, no-nonsense whites who labour in the untamed bush to develop Rhodesia. Their virtues are the pioneering ones of hard work, bluff loyalty and non-intellectual dedication to carving a nation out of virgin black minds and dusty bush. The attitude to blacks is appallingly unconsidered. The masses are children, yet after seventy years of colonisation whites feel no guilt for having failed to “develop” their self-imposed charges. Indeed, education is proven to be dangerous for blacks – for who can tell whether an educated African will turn into a radical snake like Molemo or a responsible moderate like Tom? The black radicals have no real political programme. In fact, politics are an irrelevant sophistication imported by self-serving intellectual Britons to destroy the personal loyalties which are of primary importance.

These plays are frightening because they so clearly demonstrate the prevailing white Rhodesian view, both of themselves and of the black majority. Although more sophisticated than the plays of the early part of the century, the racist thinking behind them has changed not one iota.

Interestingly, although both *Sikelele Afrika* and *Poison the Sun* were put on at Reps they could not command large audiences. Whites in Rhodesia preferred to devote their leisure time to pure escapist entertainment. Talking of indigenous white drama, the *Tabex Encyclopaedia Zimbabwe* (Harare, 1987) comments:

⁵⁴ Watson, *Sikelele Afrika*, Act 2, scene i.

The preference for West End and Broadway “box office” hits and the wish to avoid productions which addressed themselves to the colonial situation meant that such plays tended to be rejected by the mainstream “little theatre” movement.⁵⁵

For whites, the whole purpose of drama was that it removed them from, rather than integrating them into, local realities.



⁵⁵ *Tabex Encyclopaedia Zimbabwe*, ed. Katherine Sayce (Harare: Quest, 1987): 116.

3

THEATRE IN LIBERATION STRUGGLES

The value of culture as an element of resistance to foreign domination lies in the fact that culture is the vigorous manifestation, on the ideological or idealist level, of the material and historical reality of the society that is dominated or to be dominated. Culture is simultaneously the fruit of a people's history and a determinant of history, by the positive or negative influence it exerts on the evolution of relations between man and his environment and among men or human groups within a society, as well as between different societies. Ignorance of this fact might explain the failure of several attempts at foreign domination.¹

THESE WORDS FROM AMILCAR CABRAL, the leader of Guinea's particularly protracted and violent liberation struggle, show a rare insight on the part of a political leader into the importance of asserting cultural identity in nationalist struggles. I hope to demonstrate in this chapter that the more vicious and prolonged the fight for independence became in the nations with which I am here concerned, the more both the leadership and the mass of those involved in the struggle turned to cultural – particularly performance – forms, to conscientise and to explain political programmes.

In Tanganyika demands for independence only gained momentum around 1954, after Julius Nyerere provided a constitution for the new Tanganyika African National Union which included a pledge to seek independence. That independence was peacefully won by 1961. Possibly because victory was so easy, there is little other than linguistic evidence of specifically cultural mobilisation of the masses. However, in Rhodesia armed struggle began in the early Sixties and continued for almost twenty years before independence was gained. Here we see a people whose culture

¹ Amilcar Cabral, "National liberation and culture," *Unity and Struggle* (London: Heinemann, 1980): 140.

had been heavily suppressed returning to their old performance forms to create new dramas and dances explaining the liberation struggle, and asserting specifically Zimbabwean identities through performance culture.

The process of cultural conscientisation within mass struggles has tended to move through several stages. I broadly agree with Frantz Fanon's analysis of this process. In the first flush of awareness of the damage done by cultural invasion, he argues, cadres, who are usually bourgeois and therefore amongst the most affected by the imposition of colonial values, tend to react by rejecting all obvious signs of cultural assimilation and by looking backwards to "authentic" indigenous culture. This naive rejection of the outward symbols of cultural invasion is exemplified by Robert Mugabe's policy in the early Sixties, when, as leader of the Youth Wing of the National Democratic Party, the forerunner of ZANU and ZAPU,² he called on youth to search for "cultural roots." Drums, traditional dress and ancestral prayers were encouraged at meetings, and the wearing of jackets, ties and shoes forbidden. Similarly, many early African novels and plays centre on the conflict between modern Western and traditional African cultures. The modern city is often a symbol of evil, and in plays such as Mengistu Lemma's *Telfso Bekisse* (Marriage by Abduction) and Tsegaye Gebre-Medhin's *Ye Kermasow* (A Man of the Future), both written in the Sixties, there is a strong nostalgic yearning for traditional ways, and a modified version of the old culture is advocated to purify the corrupted nation.

Looking backwards to a bygone golden age which we seek to recapture has been a favourite occupation of mankind at all times, whether the symbol of that age be Adam and Eve, King Solomon, or Nyerere's idealisation of communalist life as embodied in the philosophy of *ujamaa*. It is inevitably a fundamentally reactionary stance, rejecting the challenge of creating something relevant to dynamic and necessarily changing societies. Traditionally, both the peasantry and religious institutions are resistant to change; but, more significantly for liberation struggles, the awakening intelligentsia, too, may go through a stage of idealising the past. Fanon explains:

If we wanted to trace in the works of native writers the different phases which characterise [their] evolution we would find spread out before us a panorama on three levels. In the first place, the native intellectual gives proof that he has assimilated the culture of the occupying power [...]. His inspiration is European and we can easily link up these works with definite trends in the literature of the mother country. This is the period of unqualified assimilation.

In the second phase we find the native is disturbed; he decides to remember what he is [...]. But since the native is not a part of his people, since he only has exterior relations with his people, he is content to recall their life only. Past happenings will be brought up out of the depths of his memory; old legends will be reinterpreted in the light of a

² ZANU = Zimbabwe African National Union. ZAPU = Zimbabwe African People's Union.

borrowed aestheticism and of a conception of the world which was discovered under other skies.³

Many members of the African bourgeoisie have not progressed beyond Fanon's first phase, as comprador businessmen for Western multinationals or aspirants for the benefits of a Western level of material comfort. Then there are the numerous sincere radicals and nationalists who have remained in the second phase of looking back to an idealised past, and the leaders who, after coming into power, promote archaic forms because they are "safe" and do not have the potential for arousing the people, as a truly radical, forward-looking culture must do, to question the *status quo*. The truly dynamic role of liberation culture comes with Fanon's third phase:

Finally, in the third phase, which is called the fighting phase, the native after having tried to lose himself in the people and with the people, will on the contrary shake the people. Instead of according the people's lethargy an honoured place in his esteem, he turns himself into an awakener of the people; hence comes a fighting literature, a revolutionary literature and a national literature.⁴

Furthermore, Fanon implies that it is only when the intellectual actively engages with the people in fighting the liberation struggle that his cultural production can become a true vehicle of change.

Unleashing such dynamic culture is dangerous; for, while it may be used to win hearts and minds most effectively during the course of an independence or revolutionary struggle – as Ethiopian plays did amongst the urban petit bourgeois of Addis Ababa in the Sixties, and, more radically, as did the "*pungwes*"⁵ held by ZANU cadres in the process of raising political awareness among the Zimbabwean masses in the Seventies – the force of a people's culture cannot be turned off like a tap after independence has been won. Only too frequently, those who utilise radical culture to win independence or to make a revolution later find themselves becoming the oppressors and censors when that culture is used to demonstrate how the independent leadership exploit the fruits of victory for personal, class or ethnic benefit. However, this last consideration is beyond the scope of the present chapter. For the time being, my intention is to examine the dialectical relationship between the political struggle to cast off imperialism and the growth of radical performance culture in the nations with which I am concerned.



³ Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 178–79.

⁴ Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 178–79.

⁵ *Pungwe* literally means from sunset to sunrise. It was the term used for the all-night politicisation sessions run by guerrillas in Zimbabwean villages which employed a variety of performance forms. The meetings had to be held at night for fear of the Rhodesian army.

TANGANYIKA

*Political struggle*⁶

Tanganyika will be considered first in this chapter, both because she was the first of the countries I am studying to achieve independence, in December 1961, and because the relative ease with which independence was won meant that the instrument of cultural conscientisation had scarcely to be applied by the TANU leadership. However, it should not be forgotten that even in Tanganyika there was, from the early days of nationalist struggle, a symbiotic relationship between politics and performance culture. The young men of the African Civil Services Association had combined dancing and socialising with nebulous Pan-Africanist politics, and the welfare activities of many dance societies were precursors to politicisation. When, after the Second World War, nationalist politics took a more definite form, as evidenced by the formation in 1948 of the Tanganyika African Association (TAA) to replace and broaden the base of the Civil Services Association, dancing and social activities were discouraged. These were seen as expressions of levity unbecoming a serious political movement. The dance in particular had to go because it was the élitist ballroom style of *dansi* which was practised by civil servants. The colonial régime had effectively divided many forms of cultural expression along class lines, and since there was no one aspect of performance culture that could easily be associated with a pan-Tanganyikan identity, the political leadership saw no obvious role for dance or drama in the nationalist struggle.

As in many other colonies, it was involvement in the Second World War that increased political awareness among the many ordinary people who fought and worked in the international arena in the early Forties. Consequently, the late Forties saw a rise in labour unions, leading to unprecedented actions such as the 1947 general strike, which resulted in significant wage rises for Africans. There was also a growth in agricultural marketing cooperatives and in ethnic as well as cultural organisations, all of which at times played a quasi-political role. However, by 1951 the TAA had a membership of only five thousand, and various branches frequently went into periods of near eclipse. While the Party had begun to protest the outdated insistence on indirect rule through tribal chiefs, Tanganyika's political struggle was greatly assisted by United Nations pressure on Britain.

Because Tanganyika was a mandated territory, the United Nations had a duty to send triennial Visiting Missions to the country. From the late Forties onwards, these

⁶ For political information on this period I have relied mainly on Iliffe, *History of Tanganyika*, Stephens, *Political Transformation*, and on Issa Shivji, *Law, State and the Working Class in Tanzania* (London: James Currey, 1986).

forced a laggard Britain to consider the development and independence of the colony. It was largely due to U.N. pressure that a Legislative Council was set up in 1950, where, on the principle of racial parity, seven seats each were set aside for Europeans, Asians and Africans.

The return of Julius Nyerere from studies in Britain in 1952 was, however, the real turning-point in nationalist politics. In 1953 Nyerere was elected president of the TAA, and in 1954 he set up a replacement party, the Tanganyika African National Union (TANU) which unequivocally declared itself for independence. The U.N. visitors of 1954 listened to the infant TANU and supported its call for majority rule, putting pressure on the British government to consider independence for Tanzania in the near future. In 1955 TANU had only fifteen thousand members concentrated largely in the major towns, but Nyerere embarked on a series of politicising and recruiting tours which reached the most remote villages, so that by July 1958 the party could boast three hundred thousand members. When the British conceded limited-franchise elections in 1958/59, TANU and its Asian and European supporters triumphed overwhelmingly. Whitehall had to give way. By 1960 Nyerere was Chief Minister, and on December 9, 1961, independence was formally granted.

The role of culture⁷

Although in the Fifties and Sixties Tanganyika had become an increasingly complex state with traditional and modern cultures co-existing, it was severely under-developed compared to many other British colonies. In 1957 only two-and-a-half percent of the people were urban dwellers. At independence literacy was only sixteen percent; only thirty-two percent of eligible children were in primary education, and a mere handful had received any higher training. Performance culture was still predominantly traditional, although urban areas hosted a wide variety of dance societies.

British interest in indigenous culture, always minimal, was almost exclusively vested in the literary arts. For cultural purposes, the British had tended to regard their East-African possessions as basically similar. So in 1930 an Inter-Territorial Language Committee was set up to promote and standardise Kiswahili. Although this body had a ostensible duty to promote vernacular writing, it did little to perform this brief, and in 1948 the literary function was taken over by the East African Literature Bureau. Most of the early work published by the Bureau originated in Kenya, a situation which caused some difficulties for Tanzania on independence. Most of it was also educational and for children. In 1937 a Kiswahili version of Aesop's fables appeared, while in 1948 one David E. Dawa published a cautionary

⁷ My cultural sources on this section were mainly Hussein, "On the Development of Theatre in East Africa," Knappert, *Traditional Swahili Poetry* and his *Four Centuries of Swahili Verse*.

volume, *Mtoto mvivu na hadithi nyingine* (The Lazy Child and other stories). The first original published Kiswahili drama also came via Kenya. Henry Kuria's *Nakupenda, lakini* (I Love You, But...) was published in 1957 and; according to Knappert; was "a murderous tragedy dealing with the conflict between traditional and modern ways of life in rural Kenya."⁸

There was one outstanding figure in this period of Tanzanian Kiswahili literature. Shabaan Robert's (1909–1962) influence was enormous. He came from Tanga on the Swahili coast, but was significantly of pure African descent as opposed to the Mswahili;⁹ who prided themselves on their tradition of Kiswahili literature, and were often of mixed Arab and African heritage. Shabaan Robert was almost single-handedly responsible for the modernisation of Kiswahili literature, for doing away with the constraints in form and subject-matter of traditional poetry, and for promoting the use of the language in prose literature. For Shabaan Robert, Kiswahili as a language and a literature was not the possession of the Mswahili but a medium for the cultural union of all of East Africa. As a *lingua franca*; basic Kiswahili had been spreading throughout East Africa since the early nineteenth century, but the vision of Kiswahili as a proud language of literature capable of as great a flexibility as the languages of imperialism, and as a tool of regional unification, belongs largely to Shabaan Robert. His theories and writings were enormously influential, and the promotion of Kiswahili as a national language was probably the most important specifically cultural programme of the TANU nationalists.

A feature of Nyerere's politicising tours of Tanganyika in the late Fifties was his refusal to accept the use of interpreters for local languages. Instead, he spoke in earthy, people's Kiswahili, constantly promoting the tongue as the national language of all Tanganyikans. Indeed, the importance Nyerere attached to the status of Kiswahili is reflected in the fact that after becoming president he found time to translate Shakespeare into the vernacular. Leonard Klein sees this as a specifically nationalistic move:

As a way of disarming detractors of Swahili who said it could not be the vehicle of science and high culture, and who were opposed to its adoption as a national language, President Nyerere translated Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice* and *Julius Caesar* into Swahili in the 1960s, thus assisting the meteoric rise of literature in Swahili to its status as a national literature today.¹⁰

The translation of England's greatest playwright proved Nyerere's point about the versatility of Kiswahili. However, it is interesting that he felt the point needed

⁸ Knappert, *Traditional Swahili Poetry*, 136.

⁹ An Mswahili is a member of the Swahili ethnic group.

¹⁰ *African Literatures in the 20th Century: A Guide*, ed. Leonard S. Klein (New York: Ungar, 1986): 217.

proving on colonialist terms, and this brings us back to the question of how much a culture needs to justify itself in Western terms – or whether it should assert its own centrality without reference to external criteria.

Shabaan Robert's choice was different. He promoted Kiswahili as a national language by collecting and printing popular song-poems, and he was one of the first Africans to assert the importance of the role of oral literatures in modern national cultural studies. A final point to make about Shabaan Robert is that the vast bulk of his work is heavily didactic. In this he followed certain strands of Swahili literary tradition, and to a lesser extent the tradition of much pre-colonial oral literature. It is impossible to determine how much this emphasis affected later writers, many of whom were also influenced strongly by socialist theories, but didacticism has remained prevalent to the present day in both literary and performance cultures throughout Tanzania.

In the area of drama, colonial attitudes and the English language held sway. We have already seen that no original Kiswahili drama was published in Tanganyika prior to independence. Possibly the vigour of indigenous dance and music forms lessened the need for a new form, and certainly the exclusive nature of education and the fact that drama was equated with English education must have meant that European-style theatre was seen as a colonialist and *élite* phenomenon rather than as a performance form of mass appeal. There seems to have been almost no attempt to adapt drama, unlike other European performance forms, to an acceptable indigenous style. Hussein argues that "the imported theatre within fifty years established itself as the theatre, not only for British settlers and colonists, but also to, and for, the *élite*, African intellectuals and artists."¹¹ The one initiative which the British took in promoting drama was the introduction from 1957 of an annual national Schools Drama Competition, a policy which was common to the other East African colonies. Hussein says that most East African secondary schools participated in these competitions, which required a play or extract in English lasting no longer than forty-five minutes. All the plays performed were set texts or other "safe" pieces.¹²

Such restrictive and censored promotion of an art-form was hardly likely to be conducive to the production of a flourishing indigenous plant. Sadly, in many ex-British colonies, including both Tanzania and Zimbabwe, independent governments have continued to use competitions, often within very restrictive rules, as the main means of promoting (or restricting) drama. They have thereby been in danger of turning drama into a hot-house specimen capable of living only in an artificial atmosphere.

¹¹ Hussein, "Theatre in East Africa," 178.

¹² See Hussein, "Theatre in East Africa," ch. 2.

None of the published histories of the Tanzanian independence movement give any credit to the arts. However, as Penina Mlama points out,

Documentation of histories of struggles for independence in Africa often do not mention the artistic groups and individuals who through dance, song, poetry, recitations and such other forms played a significant role in mobilising people for the independence struggle.¹³

Mlama herself goes on to mention Kilikali, Mwinamila and Makongoro as performers who worked for the politicisation of the people. Official reluctance to credit artists, coupled with historians' frequent apparent blindness to inter-relationships between politics and culture, does create significant problems for anyone researching into cultural history. One cannot help but realise that both political and intellectual leaderships have little appreciation of how art and society relate to each other. This narrowness of vision, I think, reflects the on-going breakdown of holistic communalist attitudes in African societies which occurred as Western political forms and a compartmentalised understanding of life gained hold over the would-be leaders of nations struggling for independence.

I have been able to find no further information on campaigning performance artists involved in the Tanzanian independence movement. Certainly there seems to have been less of an overt cultural aspect to the struggle than would later be discernible in Zimbabwe. The final point I wish to make here is that in the Fifties TANU had little ideology beyond that of nationalism. Indeed, one of the reasons the British granted independence to Tanganyika so easily is that Nyerere was viewed as a moderate and his policies were expected to be essentially capitalist. National unity was the great aim of TANU, hence the promotion of a national vernacular language, but nationalism on its own can hardly be a comprehensive ideology. Tanzania had to wait for *ujamaa* in 1967 before she could acquire a campaigning, committed performance culture.

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¹³ See Penina Mlama, *Culture and Development: The Popular Theatre Approach in Africa* (Uppsala: Nordiska Afrikainstitutet, 1991): 58–59.

ETHIOPIA

*The rise of political awareness: 1959–1974*¹⁴

The Ethiopian experience differed substantially from that of most other African nations. This is not only explained by the circumstances of Amhara rather than European imperialism but also by the fact that, although the inequalities of feudal rule finally resulted in revolution in 1974, political pressure up until that time had been reformist rather than revolutionary. It is important to note that this pressure was exerted not by oppressed nationalities within the Ethiopian polity, but by upper-class Amharas who had been exposed to modern ideas of political and social organisation and could not fulfil their fundamentally bourgeois aspirations within the autocratic feudal state as run by Haile Selassie. The Amhara aristocracy, which both controlled the feudal system and, through its younger scions, pressed for reform, was closely interrelated and often court-based. Those who were the key figures in the political process almost all operated from Addis Ababa. Whether they were court appointees, military, students or dramatists, they were likely to be known to each other and to the Emperor. This interrelationship helps explain the importance of the Addis Ababa theatres and playwrights in the Sixties and Seventies. The plays were largely directed and written (though not performed) by members of the élite, and a new production would frequently be attended by the Emperor and senior officials. The messages conveyed, both covert and overt, were therefore likely to be the subject of considerable attention and to reflect closely the thinking of the rising generations of the intelligentsia.

In the conflict between feudal and bourgeois systems the figure of the Emperor was all-important. Haile Selassie was the autocrat *par excellence*, his position partly determined by an Amhara world-view which was hierarchical in the extreme. It gave the Emperor quasi-divine status and invested him with absolute power over the peoples and land of Ethiopia. However, this theory had in practice been subverted in many previous epochs, and it was subject to various checks and balances in the form of the power of the church and of the great regional aristocrats.

Haile Selassie's achievement, which also carried the seeds of his downfall, was to build on the work of his predecessors, Tewodros, Yohannes¹⁵ and Menelik, in centralising state power. He succeeded to such a degree that to all intents and pur-

¹⁴ My sources on Ethiopian political history for this period were mainly Kapuscinski, *The Emperor*, Markakis, *Ethiopia*, and Christopher Clapham's *Transformation and Continuity in Revolutionary Ethiopia*, (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1988).

¹⁵ Emperor Yohannes ruled from 1876 to 1889 and continued Tewodros' attempts to consolidate the Ethiopian empire.

poses the Emperor *was* the government. No government decision which involved the expense of more than ten Ethiopian dollars could be carried out without his approval. The vast majority of government appointments were made personally by the Emperor. All students going abroad were interviewed by him on their departure and return; according to the playwright Tsegaye Gebre-Medhin, Haile Selassie even read, and on occasions personally amended, playscripts which were submitted to the censor's office.

Engagement in politics was forbidden to Ethiopians. Instead, personal loyalty to the person of the Emperor was all-important. Inefficiency, corruption and even sheer incompetence could all be excused so long as one's loyalty was unquestionable. To maintain sole control, Haile Selassie kept almost no written records but relied instead on his phenomenal memory. He built up elaborate rival spy-systems for internal espionage. He also manipulated his courtiers by means of promotions and demotions, and by encouraging the factional and personal disputes which were an inherent feature of court life. So long as the political motivation of his potential rivals was within the feudal mind-set and for personal gain, the Emperor's strategies worked to near-perfection. What he could not deal with were the challenges posed by modern, alien ideologies, especially when these appealed to supra-personal considerations.

The first major challenge of this type, and the beginning of the end for Haile Selassie, came with the attempted coup of 1960 led by Geremame and Mengistu Neway. This was not the first coup-attempt against the Emperor. What made it extraordinary was, first, the fact that the Neway brothers were trusted aristocrats (Mengistu was General of Haile Selassie's Imperial Bodyguard) and, second, that their motivation was not primarily personal power-seeking but dismay at the stagnation of the economy and the court's disregard for the well-being of the nation as a whole. The coup was relatively easily crushed, but it heralded a growing wave of discontent among modern, urban sections of society. Throughout the Sixties students at Haile Selassie I University resorted with increasing frequency to demonstration and strike action in their demands for democratic reform. At the same time workers, including theatre performers, began for the first time to demand rather than beg for improved conditions.

*The reformist theatre*¹⁶

One of the leading forces calling for change was the drama, particularly that emanating from the Haile Selassie I Theatre and the University Creative Arts Centre.¹⁷ Here it is perhaps necessary to discuss in more detail why drama, so negligible a force in Tanzania, was an important political tool and the prime reformist performance form in Ethiopia. Several factors are involved. First, although in both countries it was the educated élite who led the struggle for change, in Tanganyika the group had no particular ethnic affiliation and was in most cases only one generation removed from the life of the mass of the people. The leaders of TANU were nationalists committed to liberation for all, and their colonial opponents were easily identifiable by all Tanganyikans as alien oppressors.

In Ethiopia, although the reformers wanted democratic reform and to varying degrees claimed to be speaking on behalf of the people, they were mostly Amhara, upper-class and profoundly alienated from the realities of life for the majority of the Ethiopian peasantry. Moreover, they made no attempt to recruit the mass of people to their viewpoint but preferred to push for change from within their circle of privilege. Above all, most were frightened of revolutionary change. What they wanted was reform, and what they argued about was the degree and speed of reform necessary. In Tanganyika, TANU set out to be a mass party, as was necessary to prove the legitimacy of its demand to have the right to lead the people of Tanganyika in preference to a colonial government. Any cultural form TANU was likely to promote was therefore going to be something which could claim to represent all Tanganyikans, and which emphasised a national identity in opposition to that of the colonists. Hence the promotion of Kiswahili and the unimportance of drama, which was seen as a foreign medium imposed for imperialist ends. In Ethiopia peasant cultural forms were as irrelevant to the ruling class as peasant aspirations, and Ethiopia contained so many ethnic groups, each with its own strong sense of identity and antipathies, that for them to unite as a force for revolution was almost inconceivable.¹⁸ The *kinet* and music forms of the people of Ethiopia reflect an absence of

¹⁶ My main written sources on the theatre for this period have been Abebe Kebede, "Actors in the History of Ethiopian Theatre," "Theatre Directors in Ethiopia" by Mengistu Mamo (senior paper, Theatre Arts Department, Addis Ababa University, 1983), and Mamitu Yilma, "The History of the Ethiopian National Theatre" (senior paper, Department of History, Addis Ababa University, 1987). However, I have also drawn extensively on interviews with Tsegaye Gebre-Medhin, Mengistu Lemma, Tsefaye Gessesse and Debebe Eshetu.

¹⁷ The Creative Arts Centre, later known as the Cultural Centre, is dealt with in more detail below. It was set up in 1963 and has continued to work as a university arts centre through most of the subsequent vicissitudes of Ethiopian political life.

¹⁸ Ethiopia has over seventy ethnic groups. Unlike the situation obtaining in Tanzania, most of them have a very strong sense of identity and retain their own languages and cultural forms.

politicisation and have not been used as tools in the liberation struggle to anything like the extent found in many other African nations. Instead, they have confined themselves largely to traditional themes and, more recently, to romantic concerns. Pressures for change emanated almost exclusively from those members of the élite who had been exposed to modern education, and who had in several cases witnessed more democratic forms of government at first hand as the result of studying abroad. Since overt political activity was outlawed by Haile Selassie, intellectuals had to find other means of expressing their ideas, and in the Sixties and early Seventies the drama was taken up by some of this group as a vehicle for discontent.

I have already shown how the drama came to be an accepted élite performance form. The change that occurred in the Sixties was that it was increasingly appropriated by a new generation of young reformers, and moved from being a vehicle for aristocratic glorification to a tool for highlighting social and quasi-political issues.

The new drama

The radical change in the function of drama was initiated by a small group of young men, most of whom encountered drama via secondary or higher education, and who in some cases subsequently travelled abroad specifically to study drama techniques. The names that stand out in this group are those of Tsegaye Gebre-Medhin, Mengistu Lemma, Tesfaye Gessesse, Debebe Eshetu and Wogayehu Nigatu.¹⁹ With the exception of Tsegaye all were upper-class Amharas, and all were influenced in their work not only by an education in European dramatic forms but also by early experience of the traditions of classical *qene*. Tesfaye, Debebe and Wogayehu all encountered drama for the first time as students at the University, became involved in acting, and so impressed audiences that they won scholarships – Tesfaye to the United States and the latter two to Hungary – to study the discipline further. Mengistu Lemma was the late starter of the group as far as theatre was concerned. He was first a poet, and became Ethiopia's most eminent satiric playwright in his thirties only after writing successfully in several other genres. However, it was Tsegaye Gebre-Medhin who was to become Ethiopia's most prolific and famous playwright, and the most powerful dramaturge in the country. The new reformist theatre must be dated from Tsegaye's return to Ethiopia in 1959, after spending a year in England and France studying drama on a UNESCO scholarship, and his subsequent appointment as Vice-Director of Arts at the Haile Selassie I Theatre.

Prior to 1959 the Haile Selassie Theatre had been run largely for the Emperor's pleasure. It opened in splendour for the 1955 Silver Jubilee, complete with imported electrical equipment and orchestral instruments, and with an Austrian director and

¹⁹ For more detailed information on the lives and work of these men, see Jane Plastow, "Ethiopia: The Creation of a Theatre Culture," M.Phil. thesis (Manchester University, 1989): ch. 4.

technicians. The opening play was scheduled to be Makonnen Endalkachew's *Dawitna Orion*, but Haile Selassie ordered the actors off in mid-performance in order to bring on a French ballet company he had hired at enormous cost for the occasion. In the following four years only twelve short-running productions were mounted, often with costumes imported from abroad and lavish scenery. Since seats cost up to fifty Ethiopian dollars, few outside court circles attended; between sporadic bursts of imperial interest, the acting company, which had been moved wholesale from the old City Hall Theatre, languished in abject poverty.

With Tsegaye's appointment the theatre began to change. He and the new Director of Arts, Seyoum Sibhat, Ethiopianised the whole concern, and from 1959 until his resignation in 1970 Tsegaye effectively ran the Haile Selassie Theatre, using it primarily to mount a string of his own plays and his translations of Shakespeare and Molière. Such productions make up nearly half of the twenty-five plays for which I have been able to find records in this period.²⁰ The plays cover a range of genres, from the historical to love stories, and vary from one-act pieces to epics which may take up to four hours of performance time. The most significant and popular were those which addressed the plight of both urban and rural masses, and the playwright's best-known work, *Tewodros*, which draws on the historical figure of Emperor Tewodros to question the role of a sovereign, and to cast doubt on the concept of divine right.

The greatest single innovation of Tsegaye's work was the placing of ordinary people at the centre of many of his plays. Ethiopian art traditionally sees the lower classes as of less value than the nobility, and had tended to concentrate on the glorification of God and the monarchy; the emblematic nature of this traditional art was also at odds with the move towards psychological realism in these new people's plays. Yet the people themselves responded by coming in growing numbers to a theatre which for the first time began to be representative of more than just the hegemonic group. Many of Tsegaye's plays were censored, and, even when a performance was allowed, permission for publication was frequently refused. His early works *Askeyami Ligagered* (The Ugly Girl) and *Kosho Cigara* (Cheap Cigarettes) were both subjected to cuts, while *Joro Dagif* (Mumps)²¹ earned Tsegaye a day in prison when the Chief of Police overheard what he considered to be inflammatory lines being quoted by an actor in a bar.

The most popular of the Sixties people's plays, and the one which perhaps most profoundly demonstrates the shift in drama to a concern for the masses, was *Ye*

²⁰ See Plastow, "Ethiopia: The Creation of Theatre Culture," Appendix A.

²¹ Tsegaye Gebre-Medhin, *Askeyami Ligagered* (unpublished); *Kosho Cigara* (unpublished); *Joro Dagif* (unpublished).

Kermasow (A Man of the People).²² This is a sombre piece examining the degradation of city life among the poor and the aspiring petit bourgeoisie. The play centres on two brothers, Mogus and Tekola, who are living in poverty in Addis Ababa. Mogus is a clerk whose wife has left him, along with their only child, to go and live with a richer man. Mogus tries in vain to control his younger brother, Tekola, who, although nominally a student, has given himself up to a life of dissolution amongst the city's numerous bars. Into this scene of spiritual and material destitution comes the brothers' dying uncle, Abiye, who misguidedly seeks health in the sick atmosphere of the capital. However, this uncle has a further dream: to restore the brothers by persuading them to go back to their ancestral lands and seek salvation in the "pure" life of the countryside.

Ultimately Abiye dies, Mogus is left utterly demoralised, and Tekola finds himself in prison for attacking his former sister-in-law's second husband. Yet it is in Tekola that we see the possibility of salvation, for he alone retains his fighting spirit. Abiye's day of ultra-conservatism has passed, Mogus has been destroyed by his unending series of tribulations, but Tekola rejects traditional fatalistic acceptance of one's lot in life and at the end of the play is considering building a new future back on the family farm.

In all this there is a strong streak of the nostalgia common to many literary works coming out of Africa in the Sixties. The city is an evil, corrupting entity, and purity and hope lie in rejecting alien (ie Western) values and returning to true Ethiopian tradition. Yet it is not quite so simple. Abiye, who embodies tradition, is an anachronism and cannot survive in the new age. What Tsegaye would have us admire in Tekola is the spirit that rejects the traditional teaching of the church that the meek shall inherit the earth. Above all, the play raises questions about the future. If we cannot simply re-create the past, and the present is so hopeless for the urban masses, in what direction should youth look for the future? The implicit criticism of government in all this was sufficient to cause Haile Selassie to walk out of the play's premiere. In particular he could not tolerate the descent of Mogus's wife into prostitution, and the condition for performances to continue was that she and her small son should be cut from the script.

Tesfaye Gessesse had joined Tsegaye at the Haile Selassie Theatre in 1960 and built his reputation more as a director than a playwright. However, he did write some plays in the Sixties, and his most famous early piece, *Yeshe*, also manifests concern with the evils of the city.²³ *Yeshe* is more simplistically judgemental than *Ye Kermasow*. Indeed, in a recent interview Tesfaye said that he had moderated his views towards women like the eponymous heroine. *Yeshe* (meaning "of the thou-

²² Tsegaye Gebre-Medhin, *Ye Kermasow* (Addis Ababa: Berhanena Selam Press, 1965/66).

²³ Tesfaye Gessesse, *Yeshe* (unpublished).

sands”) is a prostitute; the name is significant both because she is representative of the many corrupted by city life, and because Addis Ababa has a deserved reputation as a city rife with prostitution. In Tesfaye’s play *Yeshe* is irredeemably wicked. Following in the footsteps of many of her prostitute sisters she is a poor woman from the countryside who has been divorced and has come to the city to seek her fortune. She eventually establishes herself as a small bar-owner-cum-prostitute and follows her new profession with some relish.²⁴ She batters onto a lonely widower, Malaku, who falls in love with her. The play then demonstrates how *Yeshe* mercilessly strips her victim of all his possessions to feed her greed, until Malaku ends up destitute and in prison.

In *Yeshe* we see the city as the embodiment of hard, uncaring selfishness, and as a vacuum of loneliness which leaves the weak vulnerable to exploitation. Although *Yeshe* was a new departure in that it was probably the first play to place a lower-class woman at its centre, the characterisation of women as evil, lustful and mercenary beings was not unusual. Feminist criticism of Ethiopian drama is in its infancy, and women are commonly described only in relation to stereotyped roles as lover, wife or mother.²⁵ Characterisation of women tends to be particularly crude, and in the Judaeo-Christian tradition their role is generally that of sexual temptress and destroyer of men.

Mengistu Lemma’s view of women in his two marriage-plays of the Sixties, *Telfso Bekisse* (Marriage by Abduction) and *Yelecha Gebecha* (Marriage of Unequals), begins to be more sophisticated, but his female characters are still primarily mere vehicles for expressing social ideas about the conflict between tradition and modernity.²⁶ Both of the marriage-plays feature aristocrats of the older generation, whose influence is felt long before they appear on stage. Although Fitawrari Merrine in *Telfso Bekisse* is a warrior-hero, whereas Lady Alganesh of *Yelecha Gebecha* is a bigoted, superstitious autocrat, both partake of the aristocratic self-confidence which Mengistu venerates. In contrast, his young protagonists, Bezabih-Tori, who plans to abduct a bride in emulation of heroes of old, and Baharu, who attempts to enlighten the peasantry and marries a peasant girl in the effort to fulfil his ideal of the simple life, are shown to have lost

²⁴ For rural women in Ethiopia there are few alternatives to marriage. Many who divorce or leave their husbands come to Addis Ababa and are forced to work as waitress-prostitutes in order to survive.

²⁵ The only feminist paper on Ethiopian theatre of which I am aware is Jemanesh Solomon’s “Women Characters in Ethiopian Theatre” (senior paper, Department of Theatre Arts, Addis Ababa University, 1988), which caused a considerable stir when it was read at a conference at the National Theatre in 1989 because it presumed to criticise the shallow characterisation of women in plays by some of Ethiopia’s leading playwrights.

²⁶ Mengistu Lemma, *Telfso Bekisse* (Addis Ababa: Ethiopia Observer, 1962); *Yelecha Gebecha* (Addis Ababa: Ethiopia Observer, 1963).

their forcefulness, their common sense and their understanding of traditional Ethiopia, as a result of their westernised education. Bezabih-Tori does attempt to act with heroic decision in abducting his bride, and certainly acts with honour in protecting her virtue, but his actions proceed from a jumble of mixed motives, confused not least because he has failed to take into consideration the possibility that the bride might have a will of her own. Baharu's intentions in leaving the city to teach in a rural village and marry a simple village girl are patently pure, and represent an ideal of freeing the peasantry from the shackles of feudal ignorance and superstition without exposing them to Western decadence. Yet Baharu commands nothing like the respect of his autocratic aunt. We find out how little his teachings have affected the people when even his star pupil and wife, Belete, deserts him at the urging of the village sooth-sayers. Ultimately, because they are comedies, both plays have happy endings, with the abducted Teffesech falling in love with Bezabih-Tori and Belete returning to Baharu, but in both cases it is more by luck than by judgement that these well-intentioned but naive young men find happiness.

Telfso Bekisse was initially shown without censorship, but during the course of the Sixties restrictions on plays became tougher. At the premiere of *Yelecha Gebecha* at the University, the Emperor graciously congratulated the actors on their performances but refused to meet the playwright who mocked the aristocracy. A revival of *Telfso Bekisse* in the early Seventies led to the closing of the University's Cultural Centre. On the day before the first performance a government van appeared and without explanation removed all the chairs from the hall. The performance went ahead, with the audience sitting on the floor, but the Centre's director, Debebe Eshetu, was well aware of the Emperor's preference for oblique criticism. He took the hint and next day closed his theatre.

Apart from plays about the social problems of the people, Tsegaye is notable for turning the tradition of historico-patriotic drama from an instrument of imperial glorification into a means of questioning the idea of the Solomonic divine right to rule. *Tewodros*, his best-known work, is on the surface a simple piece glorifying the imperial past. It tells the story of the rise of Tewodros, the great Christian-inspired unifier of previously divided Ethiopia, and portrays in almost biblical terms his downfall at the hands of the British.²⁷ Tewodros even dies with Christ's lament on his son's lips: "*Abbaba! Lemin Tewkegn?*" (Father! Why hast thou forsaken me?).²⁸

However, the covert message is far more subversive. Throughout the play it is emphasised that Tewodros, who prefers to be known by his personal name of

²⁷ Tewodros was originally called Kassa. It is the custom in Ethiopia for monarchs to take a crown name on assuming the throne. The choice of Tewodros was significant because legend had it that a messianic king called Tewodros would come to save Ethiopia in her moment of need.

²⁸ Tsegaye Gebre-Medhin, "Tewodros," *Ethiopia Observer* (London, 1966): 93.

Kassa, is a man of the people. He comes from a simple peasant background, and his enemies are the selfish priesthood and the remnants of the Solomonic line, Empress Menen and Ras Ali, who care only for their rank and have allowed Ethiopia to fall into disarray. Tewodros is constantly tormented by the blood he is forced to spill in order to re-establish Ethiopia as a great Christian nation. His suicide occurs largely because he has been unable to convince the forces of reaction of the need to abandon selfish greed and unite in fulfilling his dream of modernising and re-uniting the Empire.

Tsegaye makes it clear that the traditional pillars of the Empire, the church and the aristocracy, are the very groups which prevent Ethiopia from advancing into a hopeful future. Bloodshed is inevitable:

They make me do it! The petty, selfish lustful chiefs make me do it. They force me to shed the blood of the very people I would be more than willing to give my life for [...] The fools from within do not hesitate to make me sacrifice innocent souls to exploit their own wicked ends. Maybe they too are destined to make progress impossible, both for the people and themselves; these centuries old leeches! These stubborn powerful puppets! And, AND blaspheming monstrous priests! Those interwoven evil webs! Those eye-piercing, cheap candle-lights. They make me angry, my son. They make me do it to my beloved people.²⁹

The criticism of the Solomonic empire here is barely veiled. Indeed, in his later historical works, *Oda Oak Oracle* and *Collision of Altars*, which are similarly anti-clerical and go further in preaching tolerance for Ethiopia's multiple religions and abhorrence for religious and state bigotry, Tsegaye turned to writing in English because he was so sure that the plays would be censored.³⁰

In their work these new playwrights had constantly to tread a fine line, exploring just how far their criticisms would be tolerated before they were rejected outright by the state censors. In all cases critical comment had to employ the techniques of *samena worq* to veil at least lightly its true targets. The process appears at times to have verged on an elaborate and dangerous game between the playwrights, public, court and censors as to which critical allusions would be allowed to pass and which would result in censorship or banning.

By no means all plays were critical. Translations of Western classics and, at the University, English versions of Western plays were increasingly popular, although it should be noted that these, too, often spread philosophies which ran counter to traditional Ethiopian feudal values. Moreover, several writers attempted one-off plays which were far less politically subtle or technically accomplished than the works of the playwrights discussed above. Assegid Demisse, Aemiro Ferede and Wubshot

²⁹ Tsegaye Gebre-Medhin, "Tewodros," *Ethiopia Observer*, 221.

³⁰ Tsegaye Gebre-Medhin, *Oda Oak Oracle* (London: Oxford UP, 1965); *Collision of Altars* (London: Rex Collings, 1977).

Workalemahu were all would-be playwrights of the Sixties who produced non-controversial drama, but whose creative efforts appear to have been exhausted after a single play.³¹ However, the radical influence of the new dramatists, both technically and politically, affected the Addis Ababa theatre world. The Ager Fikir began the Sixties in its old tradition of populist patriotic drama and non-contentious *kinet*, but gradually even this bastion of imperialism turned to questioning social issues. Finally, even Iyoel Yohannes, who had produced so much non-political, entertaining ephemera, got into trouble for a reformist piece, *Ledete Etiopia* (The Birth of Ethiopia), and censorship was invoked at the Ager Fikir.³²

Inevitably the question arises as to why an autocrat like Haile Selassie allowed controversial drama when in so many other spheres criticism was simply not tolerated. The answer would appear to be complex. Partly it lies in the character of the Emperor, who wished to be known to the international community as a modernising leader. He even instituted a daily "Hour of Development" during which prestige projects such as the building of a few élite schools, large-scale farms and dams were considered. Into this category must come the development of the Haile Selassie I University (for which the Emperor also gave the smallest of his three palaces in the capital) and the building of the grandiose Haile Selassie I Theatre. These projects were never meant to disrupt the feudal foundations of the state, but as the Sixties and early Seventies progressed Haile Selassie found himself being forced to make more and more concessions to groups like the army, students and the intelligentsia, on whom the running of the modern elements of the state depended. He evidently believed that minor concessions and the payment of high salaries would control these élite groups on the basis of self-interest. The Emperor was unable to foresee that the emergent bourgeoisie would require a whole new economic and social order to satisfy their group aspirations.

In the literary and cultural fields the Emperor was influenced by a purely personal taste for fine literature. My evidence for this contention comes mainly from interviews with Tsegaye Gebre-Medhin, who claims that Haile Selassie read much of the literary material presented to censors prior to publication or performance, and who feels that the desire to control battled with an admiration for good writing, with the latter occasionally winning out over purely political considerations. This would certainly help to explain the Emperor's personal appearance at many premieres of plays about which he evidently had political reservations.

³¹ Assegid Demisse, *And Amit Keand Ken* (A Year and a Day), unpublished; Aemiro Ferede, *Fikir Mecheresha* (Love to the End), unpublished; Wubshot Workalemahu, *Basha Bezemu* (Basha Bezemu), unpublished.

³² Iyoel Yohannes, *Ledete Etiopia*, unpublished.

Moreover, Haile Selassie was a most subtle autocrat. Amhara culture argues that one should never be straightforward when it is possible to be devious, and the Emperor was always reluctant to encounter opposition head on. Rather, he would demote or move those whom he distrusted, give more or less covert signals of his displeasure in order to warn an individual to mend his ways, or on occasion even make minor concessions. Hence the walking out of plays, the refusal to meet playwrights, and the removal of audience facilities on various occasions. By the early Seventies Haile Selassie's actions had pushed many dramatists into self-censorship and silence. Mengistu Lemma published no new plays from the mid-Sixties until after the revolution. Tsegaye chose to pursue *négritude* studies in Senegal after 1970, and his writing from the mid-Sixties was increasingly in English. Tesfaye Gessesse told me that the fortunate circumstance of private family wealth allowed him to take frequent breaks from the theatre whenever he judged that he might be encountering too much official disapproval. Finally, I have already shown how Debebe Eshetu was forced to resign from the University Cultural Centre as a result of a too-progressive programme.

The other element to be taken into consideration is the growing popularity of the new drama. Although at the beginning of the Sixties drama was still viewed by many as the poor relation of the more popular *kinet*, the new plays gradually made an impact. The Haile Selassie and University theatres could afford to put on ever more pure drama, and runs extended from a few days to several weeks. Moreover, this new drama attracted court, intelligentsia and petit-bourgeois interest. Haile Selassie probably enjoyed playing the role of patron to a modern, and increasingly popular, drama which he mistakenly believed he could ultimately control.

The Creative Arts Centre

I have at various points in this chapter mentioned the University Creative Arts/Cultural Centre, which was the first of a series of attempts at the University to provide a centre for experimental drama and actor training. As with so many theatrical ideas in Ethiopia, Tsegaye Gebre-Medhin claims to have been instrumental in promoting the idea of the Centre, but I have been unable to verify this information.

The Creative Arts Centre was opened in 1963 with the intention of providing a forum for both training and performance at the University. It was not quite the first attempt to provide formal performance training in Ethiopia. In 1962 the Haile Selassie Theatre had briefly set up a music school, which was forced to close in 1964 for lack of funds. However, the University Centre was the first training facility specifically for actors. The building was given by the University, and to run the course the Fulbright Commission provided an American, Dr Philip Caplan. The initial plan appears to have been to run the Centre on a largely self-financing basis.

Advertisements invited students to join the company at a salary of fifty dollars per month, with the idea that they would work with professional actors from the theatres, while income generated by performances would help pay expenses.

The training programme was rigorous. After six months, eighteen of the twenty students who originally enrolled had dropped out. Moreover, attempts to integrate traditional performers from outlying regions into the more formal drama programme failed when professional actors flatly refused to work with such "savages."³³ Another major factor affecting the drop-out rate arose from the fact that it had originally been intended to develop drama as a degree course, but bureaucratic and financial obstacles prevented this from happening. In spite of these problems, Caplan ran the Creative Arts Centre for four years, and for the first time formal training in acting, directing, stagecraft, mime and music was made available within Ethiopia. The two actors who lasted out the original course, Debebe Eshetu and Wogayehu Nigata, went on to further training in Hungary. Whilst Debebe later joined the cabal of major directors, he still does perform on occasion, and Wogayehu became Ethiopia's most renowned actor.

Caplan brought modern foreign drama to Ethiopia for the first time, including such works as Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* and Eugene O'Neill's *Before Breakfast*. He also introduced other African plays to Ethiopians. John Pepper Clark's *Song of a Goat* was the first African drama ever seen in the country. The company worked in both English and Amharinya, and although much of its work, particularly in the former language, was suitable only for an élite audience, plays by young Ethiopians were also produced, including the premiere of Tsegaye's *Tewodros* in 1963.

Caplan helped break the insularity of Ethiopian drama, which had previously seen only a handful of European classics translated into Amharinya. Ever since the late Sixties more and more dramatists have been concerned to translate and produce relevant foreign plays. Finally, the work of the Centre was instrumental in making increasingly restive and eventually revolutionary students see theatre as a source of new and relevant social ideas. At the University at least, drama became a popular performance form, and to the present day a new play can attract large numbers of students to the University theatre.³⁴



³³ This was a prime example of Amhara racism. The story was told to me by Tsegaye Gebre-Medhin, and the dancers were apparently a Nilotic group from the south-west of Ethiopia.

³⁴ The present day University Theatre was acquired only after the revolution, when the German School was requisitioned for use by the University. However, the somewhat dilapidated Cultural Centre is still in use both by the Theatre Arts Department and by the University *kinet* and modern music groups (see Fig. 9).

Actors and theatres

The position of actors in Ethiopian theatre was for many years appalling. This arose from the Amhara dichotomy between respect for the creator of fine rhetoric and contempt for action and the traditional performing caste, the *azmaris*. The division of language and action was reinforced by the Amhara belief in hierarchical organisation, and by class division, which created a huge gulf between aristocratic, educated playwrights and lower-class performers. Acting was initially barely recognised as a skill. The word was so much more important than the quality of performance that in the early days rehearsals were almost non-existent, and a man like Makonnen Hapte-Wold apparently saw nothing odd in stopping a play in mid-performance in order to re-direct his cast.

The early plays had all-male casts, since for a woman to perform was considered tantamount to making a public declaration of her loose morals. The first professional woman actor, Selamawit Gebre-Selassie, was recruited only in 1954.³⁵ All actors earned derisory wages. Ten or eleven dollars a month was a common salary in the Forties and Fifties, and ensured that performers had to seek freelance work in bars and at private functions in order to survive. Given such treatment, as well as audience preference in the early days for *kinet* rather than drama, it is hardly surprising that most *azmaris* preferred to work as singers and dancers than as actors. They also preferred to work on the improvised slapstick of Ager Fikir productions, where they were not subject to aristocratic interference, than on the turgid, serious works of such as Makonnen Endalkachew.

Azmari skills lent themselves to integrationist folk-theatre because the *azmaris* had a repertoire of musical, dance, story-telling and jesting skills. However, this was not what the dignity of court and aristocracy required from theatre, and *kinet* and drama were increasingly divided along class lines until a situation emerged (continuing to the present day) where *kinet* and acting troupes are rigidly segregated even when they are employed within the same company.

The early theatres ran on shoe-string budgets. Even the Haile Selassie Theatre, although authorised by the Emperor to spend huge amounts on costume and scenery for early productions, frequently had no money to pay actors. Indeed, the situation became so critical that parts of the theatre complex had to be rented out for shops, and the still-common practice was instituted of allowing theatres to be used also as cinemas or conference halls; a situation which results in actors being deprived of much-needed rehearsal space.

³⁵ As in many African countries, a lot of people still have doubts about the respectability of acting as a profession for women. With the gradual increase in numbers of highly educated women entering the profession and the improvement in wages perceptions are slowly changing; but the process will take a long time.

Perhaps the practice most shocking to an outside observer was that, while actors were barely able to exist, a playwright received fifty percent of all box-office receipts. Tesfaye Gessesse told me that this custom was instituted in the Fifties as an incentive to writers to provide playscripts. However, its barely modified continuation (playwrights now get forty percent or twenty-five for a translation, and directors receive ten percent), has both reinforced divisions between the value placed on actor and playwright, and has bred enmity between individual playwrights, who are encouraged by the system to be competitive rather than supportive of each other's work.³⁶

Attitudes towards performers began to change with the new era of Tsegaye and Tesfaye at the Haile Selassie Theatre. Their experiences abroad had given them insights into the value of skilled acting, and although they had no power to raise wages, they did look upon performers as more than mere puppets. For the first time the rehearsal process was taken seriously, and preparation for a new play was extended from a few days to a month or six weeks. Tsegaye told me that when he first started producing his plays about ordinary people at the Haile Selassie Theatre, senior performers refused to work with him, for they had been so indoctrinated with hegemonic values that they felt it was demeaning to play the roles of ordinary people. He therefore had to cast his early plays from junior actors, until, as time went by, the older performers came to appreciate the message and manner of representation in Tsegaye's drama and themselves began to be politicised by it. Certainly by the early Sixties performers were displaying unprecedented militancy. In 1961/62 the staff of the Ager Fikir were the first to protest at their conditions and ask for a wage rise. The only response was the sacking of thirty-three employees. But in 1963/64 both Ager Fikir and Haile Selassie Theatre performers protested again. At this stage the Emperor still felt strong enough to refuse concessions; altogether eighty-eight staff were sacked from the two theatres. The final public protest of the Sixties came from the Haile Selassie Theatre, when, in 1966, actors protested at the blatant favouritism displayed by senior staff. Although no-one was sacked on this occasion many performers had their pitiful wages docked for disrespect to officials.³⁷

In this process of politicising performers there was still a huge gulf between working-class *azmaris* and the playwright/directors. Although men like Tsegaye did not have ultimate control over theatre administration (indeed, in 1967 Haile Selassie put a trusted army captain, Atnafu Makonnen, in charge of both the Ager Fikir and

³⁶ There is an extraordinary degree of feuding between senior theatre professionals. Potential power and the rich rewards of a long-running play are obvious motives behind this situation, but the traditional Amhara lack of trust in others and taste for deviousness exacerbate the problem.

³⁷ For further information on these disputes, see Abebe Kebede, "Actors in the History of Ethiopian Theatre."

Haile Selassie theatres in order to control their radical tendencies and break their independence), there is a dichotomy between the fact that the new intellectual playwright/directors were writing and producing works denouncing the nobility and advocating respect for worker and peasant – works which in themselves conscientised actors – and the fact that these same playwright/directors appear to have seen no anomaly between their enormous power and potential earnings and the poverty of an *azmari*'s lot. Moreover, none of the educated dramaturges were truly revolutionary in their thinking. No play of this period even covertly advocates more than a kind of Fabian socialism. Men like Tsegaye, Tesfaye and Debebe sought to retain their own power and prestige while arguing, not for revolution, but for curbs on the autocratic power of the aristocracy, an increase in the institution of bourgeois democracy, and amelioration of the misery of the working class and peasantry.

Interestingly, the performers did not complain about the relative riches of playwrights and directors. As the events of the revolution were to show, men like Tsegaye were heroes to the average actor. This is possibly explained in part by the only slowly eroding acceptance of the feudal status quo, but also because, poor as they were, the professional theatre performers were relatively well off compared to the bulk of itinerant *azmaris* and to the growing body of more informally employed actors. During the Sixties more and more aspiring performers tried to join the main theatres. If they failed, competition was still intense for employment in the growing number of semi-professional *kinet* groups based in the capital. The Sixties also gave rise to amateur companies, one based at the YMCA and another attached to the Ager Fikir, the "Q Club." These both offered some training in acting skills, and in many cases served as apprenticeship schools for performers who later went on to join the professional companies.³⁸

The theatre was a dynamic agent of change in the world of growing discontent which characterised Addis Ababa in the Sixties, but the revolution which erupted in 1974 was to cause profound shock in all sections of Ethiopian society. Accommodations to the events surrounding the downfall of the Solomonic empire would have to be worked out on an ad-hoc basis by all elements of society, including theatre workers.



³⁸ My information on the amateur clubs comes from interviews with Seyoum Tefara, now a professional actor at the City Hall Theatre.

SOUTHERN RHODESIA

*The armed struggle 1965–1980*³⁹

By the time of Ian Smith's Unilateral Declaration of Independence in 1965, the black nationalist movement had already decided to escalate its programme from non-violent political pressure to armed struggle. This decision was first taken by the Zimbabwe African People's Union (ZAPU) after the party's official banning in 1962. ZAPU was one of a succession of increasingly militant liberation parties which were each banned in turn. The African National Congress, formed in 1957 and forbidden in 1959, was promptly succeeded by the National Democratic Party, which survived only until 1961. ZAPU and the breakaway Zimbabwe African National Union (ZANU) plugged the gap until, a mere nine months later, these too were prohibited.

The cultural weapon had already been invoked by Robert Mugabe as leader of the NDP Youth Wing:

On a cultural level the party on Robert Mugabe's initiative, tried to inspire the spirit of "self-sacrifice" which was marked by a rejection of European luxuries and habits and by emphasis of African culture in attire, music, diet, drinks and religion. This was supposed to inspire pride in African culture and was calculated to cultivate a spirit of self-discipline and to reduce unnecessary dependence on the white man. A culturally independent and proud people, it was thought, was likely to produce resolute fighters for political freedom. Indeed by the time the party was banned people who came to public meetings were expressing their willingness to dispense with white man's culture by attending such gatherings without shoes, socks, watches, hats and jackets [....] The NDP can be credited with having started to build a liberation culture and language, which was to culminate in the famous songs of liberation.⁴⁰

What is interesting about this early attempt at cultural liberation is not only its apparent success in raising levels of political awareness, but that after the NDP was banned the cultural weapon was not strongly invoked by the nationalists again until the Seventies. The banning of ZAPU and ZANU and their consequent decision to carry on working underground led to disarray in the liberation movements. Smith's UDI changed the black nationalist organisations from pressure groups seeking to persuade the British government to grant independence on the basis of majority rule into secret mass organisations increasingly oriented to guerrilla warfare. However,

³⁹ My main sources on the Zimbabwean liberation struggle have been *Tenacity and Turmoil*, Stoneman's *Zimbabwe's Inheritance*, Elaine Windrich's *The Rhodesian Problem, A Documentary Record 1923–1973* (London: Routledge, 1975) and *Mugabe* by David Smith, Colin Simpson & Ian Davies (London: Pioneer Head, 1981).

⁴⁰ Ngwabi Bhebe, "The Nationalist Struggle 1957–1962," in *Turmoil and Tenacity*, 101.

initially the parties were unused to covert activity and highly vulnerable to infiltration. As a result, by 1964 most of the ZANU and ZAPU leadership was either detained or restricted.

Although the necessity for armed struggle was first acknowledged in 1962, the first incident of armed confrontation occurred in Sinoia (now Chinhoyi) in 1966, led by the infant ZANLA (Zimbabwe National Liberation Army), the armed wing of ZANU. This was followed by further attacks in 1967 and 1968 by both ZANLA and ZIPRA (Zimbabwe People's Liberation Army), the latter belonging to ZAPU. Inexperienced guerrillas suffered heavy losses and were only minimally effective. By 1969 there were no armed incursions and liberation activity had reached its nadir.

The liberation movement revived because the level of oppression suffered by the black population had become intolerable. While white Rhodesia enjoyed years of a booming economy under UDI in the late Sixties and early Seventies, blacks were not only left with inferior education and job opportunities but with security laws which became increasingly repressive. After the 1960 Law and Order (Maintenance) Act the police could stop any gathering of more than three people on mere suspicion, and could prevent any material from being published; and, in a country where all subversive statements were forbidden, the government alone decided what constituted subversion. These provisions were added to progressively over the years. Claire Palley explains:

The security laws fall into several groups, each chronological stage involving a more totalitarian approach: the earlier legislation is replaced as loop-holes or as changed African opposition tactics provoke new techniques to suppress them. Thus the first security laws introduced by the Rhodesian Front are those designed to make active political opposition by nationalists virtually impossible; these laws are largely toughening-up amendments to the Law and Order (Maintenance) Act. Then come laws designed to control population movement, especially the influx of Africans into towns, and to ensure that unemployed Africans are returned to the rural areas. Next in the catalogue come emergency powers used to give the executive unfettered powers of government and power to suppress opposition – laws which become even more Draconian with the advent of UDI. Last come laws designed to counteract African insurgency and to deter African guerrilla activity.⁴¹

In response to such repression, the liberation movements turned increasingly to bases in sympathetic neighbouring countries – Zambia, Tanzania and, after the overthrow of the Portuguese colonial régime in 1974, Mozambique.

Here, and in particular at the ZANU bases in Mozambique, increasing numbers of volunteers were trained in the tactics of guerrilla warfare. They were also trained in socialist theory and the importance of working with, and raising the political

⁴¹ Claire Palley, "Law and the Unequal Society: Discriminatory Legislation under the Rhodesian Front from 1963–1969, Part 1," *Race* 12.1 (London, 1970): 15–47.

awareness of, the masses within Rhodesia. From 1976 guerrilla incursions rapidly increased in number. Armed attacks became commonplace. But just as important in winning the war were the People's Committees; these were set up in guerrilla areas, regularly held nocturnal *pungwes* – all-night rallies – sometimes several times a week in the villages, and led to a highly conscientised home base, especially in the largely Shona areas of ZANU influence.⁴²

The politicisation process called heavily on performance arts. In the guerrilla camps political discussion was frequently carried out through the medium of theatre. Traditional dances were revived and a huge number of liberation songs were carried into Rhodesia for consciousness-raising purposes. The *pungwes* made use of all these performance forms, both to revive a sense of cultural identity and to illustrate political messages. I shall deal with this new popular culture in more detail below, but it is important to recognise that the central position of cultural activity is acknowledged by many who have written about Zimbabwe's liberation struggle.⁴³

The negotiations for independence which resulted in the 1980 Lancaster House agreement and the overwhelming victory of Robert Mugabe's ZANU, contrary to white Rhodesian and British expectations, have been described by many authors in great detail.⁴⁴ From the specifically cultural viewpoint, what is noteworthy is how the process of involving the rural masses in the struggle by identifying popular mass culture with the liberation movements immensely strengthened the guerrillas' position in areas they infiltrated. Because they spoke to the people in language and terms relevant to their concerns, and used popular music and performance media to spread their messages, the guerrillas were able to subvert the ponderous machinery of colonial repression and propaganda. Political and cultural identification with the rural people gave ZANU its increasingly safe bases within the country, and the policy reaped its reward when, in April 1980, ZANU won fifty-seven of the eighty seats available to black voters, so acquiring the right to set up the first independent government of a now re-named Zimbabwe.⁴⁵

⁴² As the war progressed it became evident that ZANU was a more active organisation than ZAPU. It also became an almost entirely Shona concern, as opposed to the Ndebele ZAPU.

⁴³ See: *Turmoil and Tenacity*, 3; *Songs that won the Liberation War*, Introduction; *None But Ourselves: Masses vs Media in The Making of Zimbabwe*, by Julie Frederikse (Harare: Zimbabwe Publishing House, 1982); *Guns and Rain: Guerrillas and Spirit Mediums in Zimbabwe* by David Lan (Harare: Zimbabwe Publishing House, 1985); and Lazarus Mpfu, "Pan-African Symposium: Zimbabwean Culture and the Liberation Struggle," *Zimbabwe Review* 1.3 (Lusaka Edition; August 1969): 13–15.

⁴⁴ See *Turmoil and Tenacity: Zimbabwe 1890–1990* (Harare, 1989); *The Political Economy of Transition, 1980–1986*, ed. Ibbo Mandaza (London: Codesria, 1986); David Martin & Phyllis Johnson, *The Struggle for Zimbabwe: The Chimurenga War* (Harare, 1981); and Anthony Verrier, *The Road to Zimbabwe 1890–1980* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1986).

⁴⁵ Of the other seats, twenty were won by ZAPU and three by Bishop Muzorewa's UNAC. A further twenty were reserved exclusively for white voters.

The theatres of "separate development"

I believe that the greatness of a nation is judged by the state of development of its arts [...] Neglect of the arts shows a nation in decline – not a thing that can be said about Rhodesia. (Ian Smith, 8 September, 1973).⁴⁶

This extraordinary statement, by a man who seems to have had no personal interest in cultural events, not only reflects the increasingly self-deluding atmosphere of white Southern Rhodesia in the Seventies, but is also an interesting side-light on the lip-service even the most philistine of leaders have apparently felt compelled to pay to the arts in the twentieth century. In fact, the arts to which Smith refers were almost exclusively European imports serving the cause of white "separate development."

Separate development is a euphemism coined by apartheid apologists in an attempt to rationalise the unequal and segregated provision of amenities to different racial groups. In Rhodesia apartheid was never acknowledged as a part of formal government policy, but for the vast majority of Rhodesians oppressive racism was the *de facto* reality of life. Under the Smith régime this policy extended into the area of performance arts.

Throughout the Sixties and Seventies white amateur theatre continued to flourish in isolation from the oppressive realities of life for the black majority. As I will show below, a few modifications were made to the structuring of cultural institutions in order to improve the whites' image, but these were largely cosmetic.

For blacks who had no money to set up their own cultural bodies, the government made little provision. Indeed, the very notion that blacks had cultural needs was largely ignored by the Smith régime. Beer halls and churches for bodily and spiritual oblivion and to keep the workers docile were the white man's idea of what was appropriate for blacks. A little musical and literary education was provided in schools and a few institutions of higher learning, but white sponsorship of black arts hinged on the condition that such artistic representations were non-political and usually only in vernacular languages. A few white liberals did involve themselves in a paternalistic manner in the promotion of black arts, but once more this patronage was conditional on black acceptance of white leadership and the renunciation of liberation politics. The true development of black culture, which was indeed separate from that of the whites, was to be found in the liberation culture which evolved in the camps of the resistance fighters and refugees in the Seventies and was carried to the people via *pungwes*.

These different cultural entities had little contact with each other and, apart from comprador/reformist groups sponsored by white government, acquired strongly an-

⁴⁶ G.M. Jackson, *The Land is Bright* (Salisbury: National Arts Foundation of Zimbabwe, 1973): 8.

tagonistic identities. As later chapters will demonstrate, the heritage of "separate development" in the area of performance arts has had repercussions which continue to reverberate in independent Zimbabwe.

Escapism and exclusivity: the white theatre

The escapist world of white culture described in the previous chapter continued to flourish throughout the Seventies, with scarcely a nod in the direction of the increasingly tense liberation struggle developing within Rhodesia. A report entitled *The Land is Bright*, commissioned by the National Arts Foundation in 1973 to look into "the state of the arts in Rhodesia," talks at length of choral societies and orchestras, of eisteddfods and ballet schools, and above all of drama – "of all the arts in Rhodesia [...] the most active,"⁴⁷ with thirty-eight amateur dramatic societies affiliated to the Arts Foundation. Nearly all of these were exclusively white societies. The report does lay some stress on the Kwanongoma College of Music in Bulawayo, which from 1962 taught African music, mostly to black teachers. Otherwise black arts are merely mentioned at the end of what is largely a eulogy to white amateur enterprise.

The choral societies sang and the orchestras played European classics. The ballet schools exported their stars straight to London's Royal Ballet, and the eisteddfods enabled Welsh settlers to dream that the cool damp of the Chimanimani mountains was really Merthyr Tydfil. In the theatres the productions which won the biggest audiences in the Seventies were *Godspell* and *Jesus Christ, Superstar*. Although George Jackson's report bemoans the lack of government sponsorship of the arts (in 1973 the Arts Foundation was given R\$10,000 for the year), the evidence seems to imply that the whites were afraid of the possible impact of increased professionalism on their cosy insular world of amateur entertainment. So long as societies were amateur, their members could produce safe favourites and use the clubs primarily as social venues. Professionals potentially threatened both members' control and the extreme conservatism of white arts.

This issue is most clearly demonstrated in the case of Adrian Stanley. Stanley, a professional director, came out from Britain in 1960 and decided to stay in Rhodesia. Reps had recently built a new five-hundred-seat theatre and was under pressure to recoup building costs by mounting successful productions. They therefore employed Stanley to direct a highly popular version of Dylan Thomas's *Under Milk Wood*. Although some members of the society subsequently wished to make Stanley's employment permanent, others clung to their cherished amateur status, so the Englishman took up alternative employment with the semi-professional "Arts Theatre of Rhodesia Ltd," set up in 1961. Only the competition provided by this company and the loss of expected prizes in several major festivals persuaded Reps

⁴⁷ Jackson, *The Land is Bright*, 8.

members to change their minds: in 1964 they somewhat reluctantly voted to give Stanley a two-year contract. Continuing conservatism is demonstrated by the fact that he has held the post of director ever since.⁴⁸

Blacks were first permitted entry to Reps in 1959, but only as members of the audience. This decision precipitated what Preben Kaarsholm has designated the "Battle of the Toilets," and which he describes as follows:

When the new Reps Theatre building in Second Street Extension was opened [...] it was decided by 419 votes to 196 to favour "a non-racial policy" with respect to audiences. The Public Works Committee insisted that "Europeans are prohibited from using the same sanitary conveniences as Asiatic, Natives and/or Coloured people, and Asiatics, Natives and/or Coloured people are prohibited from using the same sanitary conveniences as Europeans". The drama society, on the other hand, found it too expensive to have extra toilets built, and a solution to the problem seemed impossible, until the Mayor of Salisbury decided that toilet regulations could quietly be forgotten about.⁴⁹

By 1961 the society went so far as to grant an Asian lawyer full Reps membership, after ascertaining that "as far as could be judged there was no hidden or political motive behind the application."⁵⁰ Subsequently a few Africans took part in *Godspell*, *Jesus Christ, Superstar* and plays like Jack Watson's which demanded black actors, but these were unusual events. In most years, most amateur companies put on an exclusively European diet of plays with all-white casts and very little in the way of non-white audiences. Most drama came into the category of "light" theatre, and although the occasional classic, or even a serious contemporary British script, might be included in the repertoire, anything overtly political was resolutely shunned.

The white amateur playwrights working in Rhodesia during this period, with only a couple of exceptions, also turned their backs on politics. A national play-writing competition was instituted in 1965, and an analysis of the work of the eleven winners that I have been able to find between 1965 and 1980 revealed no black writers and no plays dealing with black or multiracial issues. Indeed, only two of the plays were actually set in Rhodesia. For the rest, two are pure fantasy, three are comedies set in Britain, one is a romanticised history of Kathryn Howard, and the others deal with Western social issues. All conform to the standard format of the well-made play.⁵¹ The only exceptions to this escapist drama that I have been able

⁴⁸ For further information on Adrian Stanley, see *The Story of Reps*.

⁴⁹ Preben Kaarsholm, *Theatre, Democracy and Cultural Struggle*, 5–6.

⁵⁰ Stanley, *The Story of Reps*, 149.

⁵¹ Neil Jardine, *Colour the Rabbits Blue* (1965); Gregory McClune, *Last Night we Were Four* (1966); J.H. Hammond, *Our Dearest Emma* (1967); Anne Mackenzie, *The Daddy of Them All* (1968); Gregory McClune, *With Courage This Day* (1969); Daniel Pearce, *The Door* (1974); George Yiend, *Nothing Happens, Nobody Dies* (1975); Hazel Beauclare, *The Studio* (1977); Mary Rae Knight,

to find in the pre-independence period are Daniel Pearce's two reformist works, *A Credit to the Family* and *Credibility Gap*, and Judith Todd's satire, *A Guide to the Thoughts of Ian Smith*.⁵²

Daniel Pearce was a Catholic priest and schoolmaster. *Credibility Gap*, about the pressure on black students to perform well in exams at all costs, was performed at his St Augustine's school in 1972. The more complex *A Credit to the Family*, premiered at the University in 1973, also deals with the pressures of education, but tries, within a heavily moral atmosphere, to balance duty to oneself and society against the claims of the traditional African family. Father Pearce knew that he had to be circumspect in order to have his drama performed at all. In an article entitled "Who is John Moyo? Thoughts on Black Theatre in Zimbabwe" published in the *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* in 1977, he points out not only how blacks are commonly ignored in "artistic" Rhodesia – citing the example of an adjudicator of the national Amateur Drama Festival who praised a community of "only two thousand" for its high standard of performance whilst completely ignoring the fact that many thousands of blacks lived in the same town – but he goes on to describe the problems of his own kind of drama:

Of course, the themes that cry out to be dramatised are almost all bound to be shelved as being too hot to handle in present day Rhodesia, or disguised in acceptably non-political terms as with *A Credit to the Family*.⁵³

Janet Todd's play was brought out anonymously in 1971 as a political satire. It consists almost entirely of cleverly inter-cut quotations from members of the Rhodesian Front government exposing the blatantly racist motivation of the bill in question, and in particular makes Ian Smith appear a complete idiot. For obvious reasons this play could never be performed, although Kaarsholm claims that it was "circulated and read out clandestinely to hilarious effect."⁵⁴

Overall, these ventures into reformism and subversion made little impact on the world of white Rhodesian performance. The artistic community continued to work in such a manner that independence found it essentially just as cut-off from a changed political reality, and as European-oriented, as it had been at UDI.



Crown of Glass (1977); George Yiend, *Bonkers* (1978); Ian Hoskins, *It Shouldn't Happen to a King* (1980). All plays Salisbury: CABS.

⁵² Daniel Pearce, *A Credit to the Family* (Gweru: Mambo, 1983) and *Credibility Gap* (Gweru: Mambo, 1983); Judith Todd, "A Guide to the Thoughts of Ian Smith and his friends on their residential property owners (protection) bill," unpublished.

⁵³ Daniel Pearce, "Who is John Moyo? Thoughts on Black Theatre in Zimbabwe," *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 11.3 (April 1977): 51.

⁵⁴ Preben Kaarsholm, *Theatre, Democracy and Cultural Struggle*, 7.

"Kind" Whites and "good" Blacks: official African performance arts

In 1977 the National Arts Foundation tacitly acknowledged its racist stance towards the arts by admitting ignorance of how blacks spent their leisure time, and commissioned a report into the matter by one Mrs M.F. Gwata.⁵⁵ The document she produced as a result of some four hundred, mostly urban, interviews seems extraordinarily lacking in breadth but does point out the paucity of official cultural provision for Rhodesia's majority ethnic groups. Mrs Gwata confirms that drinking is the main (male) leisure pursuit, but continues with an extraordinary statement: she claims that: "non-drinkers aged 18–30 years are usually ready to devote their Sunday afternoons to practising ballroom dancing."⁵⁶ The surrealistic picture this evokes of a black population divided between alcoholics and devotees of the sequinned ball-gown is scarcely credible. Moreover, Mrs Gwata fails to mention any other dance form in her report. Drama is similarly non-existent in this document. In fact, the only other performance art which is mentioned is music. Nearly a quarter of the respondents apparently admitted to a penchant for Western music, and "pop" performers were common favourites in hotels and beer gardens. Interestingly, there is a coy admission of the growth in popularity of traditional forms, especially of a revival of "*mbira*" (the hand piano, which is now acknowledged as the prime instrument of liberation music), as being related to the liberation struggle:

Christianity and the process of westernisation condemned and suppressed traditional ways of worship and thus indirectly their music. It was not until the last decade that the spirit of nationalism brought about a revival of tribal singing and dancing [...] We have [...] to consider the limited but intense appeal of the *mbira* song accompaniment as a commentary on African urban life.⁵⁷

Mrs Gwata's research can only be believed to contain partial truths, but its very omissions are of interest and reveal how little was available officially for any group other than those blacks who were prepared to embrace white cultural forms.

Much of the music and dance publicly available to blacks was heavily influenced by white culture. The government forbade any songs which commented openly on political issues. In such an atmosphere, the mere act of reviving traditional dance or playing the *mbira* was often a covert political statement, and in fact the songs which accompanied such music became increasingly critical, at least of the social conditions of blacks.

Oral literature was almost entirely ignored by the white establishment. Written literature was encouraged only under tight supervision. To maintain divide-and-rule

⁵⁵ Mrs M.F. Gwata, "Rhodesian African Cultural and Leisure Needs," unpublished, 1977.

⁵⁶ M.F. Gwata, "Cultural and Leisure Needs," 17.

⁵⁷ M.F. Gwata, "Cultural Leisure Needs": 36–37.

policies, and to keep African writers out of the mainstream of literature, the Southern Rhodesia African Literature Bureau was set up in 1953 to publish non-contentious writing in Shona and Ndebele. Since black schools taught vernacular languages as a subject, such literature was in demand for teaching purposes. Emmanuel Ngara explains the role of the Literature Bureau as follows:

The bulk of the literature published in Zimbabwe before independence was written in Shona and Ndebele, the major indigenous languages, and much of it sheds very little light on the liberation struggle except in an indirect way. Shona and Ndebele works which saw the light of day before independence were published under the auspices of the Rhodesia Literature Bureau, a government department which placed itself in a very ambiguous position. It was charged with the responsibility of promoting literature in African languages while at the same time ensuring that such literature did not upset the existing social system or challenge the ideology of the settler ruling class. Hence it had its own censorship system. As a consequence most of the literature the Bureau published had little to say about the burning issues of the day. The focus was on traditional society where there was no conflict with European imperialism; it was on questions relating to Shona and Ndebele morals and on differences between urban and country life. The theme of culture contact and conflict which other African writers had explored so profoundly and with such great art was expressed in rather simplistic and uninspiring terms by Zimbabwean writers.⁵⁸

Critics have tended to be dismissive of the bulk of this writing, although there are a few exceptions, such as Solomon Mutswairo's novel *Feso* – published in 1957, but banned eight years later when the white régime woke up to the fact that it had nationalist undertones.⁵⁹

The output of published black drama in this period was very small. The first vernacular play, *Ndakambokuyambira* (I Warned You Before) in Shona, by Paul Chidyasiku, was published in 1962. Chidyasiku is better known as a novelist than as a playwright. He was politically moderate, and from 1974 himself worked for the Literature Bureau as an editorial assistant.

Ndakambokuyambira centres on the theme of a husband trying to find out whether his wife can be trusted with secrets. To this end he pretends to have committed a murder and is duly disillusioned about the trustworthiness of women when his horrified wife reports the matter to the chief. The play is heavily didactic. George Kahari, who admires Chidyasiku, states:

By making use of word and gesture, music and rhythm and procession the dramatist evokes the image and rhythm which are the basic principles of performance in Shona

⁵⁸ Emmanuel Ngara, "The Role of the African Writer in National Liberation and Social Reconstruction," in *Criticism and Ideology: Second African Writers' Conference*, ed. Kirsten Holst Petersen (Uppsala: Scandinavian Institute of African Studies, 1988): 132.

⁵⁹ *Feso* looked back to a peaceful, independent African past in a manner which could be taken to imply that this was a state of affairs which should be defended by black Africans.

drama. The importance of Chidyasiku in Shona society then, is to establish the Shona theatre as a regulative institution.⁶⁰

In contrast to these grandiose claims, Zinyemba complains that it is unclear whether the play is intended to be comic or serious. Although he admires the characterisation, particularly of the wife, he says that this is "a good example of a play in which nothing happens; the main theme is abandoned, and a sub-theme is pursued to its logical conclusion."⁶¹ Apart from this play I have found only nine theatrical works published in Shona prior to independence, and a mere three in Ndebele. Moreover, the bulk of the Shona work only emerged in the late Seventies, and the very first Ndebele play dates from 1976.⁶²

It is indeed true that the combination of Chidyasiku's precedent, the tastes of the Literature Bureau and, probably, the influence of oral traditions gave rise to a heavily didactic published drama, which is in fact common to all three of the nations I have studied. Of the Ndebele plays on which I have been unable to find any information, L. Sidambe's *Umkhunjulwa ufela okwakhe* (This Could Never Have Happened), Ndabezinble Sigoro's *Indlalifa ngiebani?* (Who Is the Heir?) and Barbara Makhalisa's *Umhlabo lo* (What a World) examine the hoary problems, here presented without criticism of white impositions, of the social difficulties of accommodating traditional customs to contemporary society and of vulnerable young women in modern cities. All have a monitory tone, and all, like most published drama of this period, stick to a European naturalistic format.

Of the Shona plays, seven are moral comedies. The only comprehensive attempt to analyse the published canon of Shona drama to date is R.N. Zinyemba's *Zimbabwean Drama: A Study of Shona and English Plays*, which appeared in 1986. Zinyemba classifies four of the early Shona plays as farce: S.T. Dzoro's two plays *VaGunwemugapu* (The Greedy One) and *Vedu Mudyazvavamwe* (The Parasite); M.A. Hamutyinei's *Mugapu Renyame Imherehere* (A Chaotic Situation); and Juliana Lwanda's *Mudyazvavamwe* (Parasite). He says that they all

⁶⁰ George Kahari, *The Imaginative Writings of Paul Chidyasiku* (Gwelo: Mambo, 1975): 168.

⁶¹ R.N. Zinyemba, *Zimbabwean Drama: A Study of Shona and English Plays* (Gweru: Mambo, 1986): 29.

⁶² Ndebele plays: Ndabezinble Sigoro, *Indlalifa ngiebani?* (Gwelo: Mambo, 1976); L. Sidambe, *Okunje akuzange kwenzakal* (Gwelo: Mambo, 1972); Barbara Makhalisa, *Umhlabo lo* (Gwelo: Mambo, 1977). Shona Plays: Paul Chidyasiku, *Ndakambokuyambira* (Gwelo: Mambo, 1968); Davidson Mugabe, *Rugare Tange Nhamo* (Gwelo: Mambo, 1972); M.A. Hamutyinei, *Mugapu Renyame Imherehere* (Gwelo: Mambo, 1973); Juliana Lwanda, *Mudyazvavamwe* (Gwelo: Mambo, 1976); T.K. Tsodzo, *Babamunini Francis* (Gwelo: Mambo, 1977); S.T. Dzoro, *VaGunwemugapu* and *Vedu Mudyazvavamwe* (Gweru: Mambo, 1978); Pearson M. Mashiri, *Ushe Ndokwangu*, (Gweru: Mambo, 1978); Arthur Chipinza, *Soikiro* (Salisbury: Longman, 1981).

in varying degrees dramatise, expose, ridicule and attempt to correct the vices of greed and miserliness in characters. The plots of these plays are very simple. They are also very similar. A greedy or miserly character is shown practising his "vice" on others, usually his wife or colleagues. All the other characters finally get to know what kind of person he is.⁶³

The bad character, once exposed, is generally expected to change for the better, but significantly even the bad in these plays are no monsters of depravity; their most common failing is a craving for meat.

The rural background and traditional Shona moral and social framework within which these plays operate is carried over into *Ushe Ndokwangu* (Chieftainship is Mine) by Pearson Mashiri and into Davidson Mugabe's *Rugare Tange Nhamo* (Misery Precedes Peace). These comedies (although Mugabe's also contains serious elements) also deal with greed – but here the greed is of greater import. Nyanguru in Mashiri's play longs for the chieftainship of his village, while Chikweva, the villainous old fool in *Rugare Tange Nhamo*, lusts after the body of a new young wife. The vehicle of justice in the latter play is the impossibly virtuous Tawanda, who saves our heroine, Kesina, from distress, and is duly rewarded with her hand in marriage. If characterisation is fairly basic in this play, Mashiri does display somewhat defter control of comic devices than does Mugabe, and the absurdity of the character of Nyanguru carries *Ushe Ndokwangu* along on a wave of uncomplicated comedy. Zinyemba points out that in all these plays it is not individual but social disapprobation which brings the wicked to a sense of sin. Under Shona law Chikweva is perfectly entitled to rid himself of an old wife in order to acquire a new one. What nearly brings about his suicide is the shame of being publicly associated with an apparently loose woman. The fear of communal judgement is a more powerful deterrent force than individual conscience.

Zinyemba places T.K. Tsodzo's *Babamunini Francis* (Uncle Francis) in the tragedy section of his rather simplistic polarisation of the country's dramatic canon, but he admits that the play has strong farcical elements. Tsodzo has emerged as one of Zimbabwe's most prolific and well-known dramatists. He produced two published works prior to independence, *Babamunini Francis* in 1977, and the English-language comedy *The Talking Calabash*, published in 1971 by the University magazine *Opus*. Tsodzo's plays are moral in the extreme. At the close of *Babamunini Francis* the wicked city wife, Hilda, commits suicide when her adultery is exposed, and in *The Talking Calabash* Joseph loses his betrothed, Sosana, after his crooked dealings come to light. The targets of these plays are uncomplicated. The former play castigates the immorality of rich black city-dwellers, while the latter mocks the superstitious, and seems to imply that all traditional medicine is fraudulent. Language, particularly the English of *The Talking Calabash*, is stilted and highly unnatural. Where these plays

⁶³ Zinyemba, *Zimbabwean Drama*, 24.

score is in the fast-moving farcical scenes, which carry the action along to its moralistic ending.

This brand of comedy, which appears to have been almost a pre-condition for publication in the pre-independence period, seems to me to have close links with the *vicheshesho* style promoted in a similar type of political era by the British in Tanzania. It is morally simplistic in the extreme, and not one word in any of these plays hints at imperialist evils or the independence struggle. Although the white imports of Christianity and urban bourgeois struggle are a strong influence on numerous characters, no link is ever made between foreign influences and the problems of a changing world which cause the conflicts behind many of these plays. The Zimbabweans we are shown here might well never have seen a white man, but the white man's values, mocking the rural fool in classic pre-independence *vicheshesho* style, are everywhere. Nyanguru, Chikweva and Moyo in *The Talking Calabash* are all credulous old men made fools of by a young, more modern and sophisticated generation. This pernicious denigration of old ways is combined with a contradictory idealisation of the village. In all of these plays, with the two exceptions of *Umhlaba lo* and *Babamunini Francis*, the village, with many of its traditions intact, is the basis of life. Yet, as I have already shown, many black Zimbabweans had abandoned the bulk of traditional practices by the Seventies. Moreover, by the Seventies rural reality was increasingly one of violent liberation war.

Such compradorist, escapist drama is the black equivalent of the theatre of Reps. It is a manifestation of black separate development on white terms, exposing the "foolishness" of the old ways and practices, idealising "simple" village life, and abhorring the evils of the city without ever linking those evils to white oppression. The ideal these plays cumulatively advocate is a world of village peasants who have embraced Christianity and the Protestant work-ethic, and are content with the bare modicum of education, while maintaining their more "harmless" bucolic traditions and continuing to live in an apolitical African pastoral idyll.

The one play of this period which is substantially different is Arthur Chipinza's *Svikiro* (My Spirit Sings). Although the play was only published in 1987 it was performed at no less a venue than Reps in 1978, in a two-week run which nonetheless resulted in poor audiences because the whites had no use for black theatre, and Reps, in a white suburb, was both inaccessible and profoundly alien to potential black audiences.

Svikiro in many ways represents a transition between pre- and post-independence black drama. Once more we are in a heavily traditional village world, but it is a world which is being rapidly encroached on by modern beer halls, music, and ambitious young men. Although such innovations are generally deprecated they are also seen as inevitable, and our hero, Nyati, yearns for fame – not in his inherited role of chief, but as a musician. The play is essentially a whodunit. A series of mur-

ders climaxes with the killing of the chief Nzero. No evidence of the murder is available initially, but suspicion comes to rest between the two possible claimants for the succession, ambitious, shrewd Zondi, and the artistic but somewhat irresponsible Nyati. After various twists, Zondi is revealed as the malefactor and Nyati comes to accept his ordained role as chief.

Characterisation in this play is much more subtle than in the general run of early Zimbabwean drama. Nyati is no super-hero but, for much of the play, a slightly selfish dreamer. Although one of the *n'gangas* we meet is a blatant fraud, the other is a wise and virtuous healer. Throughout the play we receive hints that this is a changing world. The elegiac chorus of elders still have much power and wisdom, but they need the help of modern youth. Above all, the form of this play breaks out of the constraints of naturalist drama. The elders play a choric role. Music, both traditional and modern, and dance are widely used, and, in a move which heralds contemporary attempts to break artificially imposed racist language barriers, the play incorporates both Shona and English. Tradition wins out, but it is a victory within a dynamic context. The village which Nyati is to rule will contain both Western and traditional values, and continuing change seems inevitable.

*Black drama groups and festivals*⁶⁴

Black drama productions only appear in any number from the mid-Sixties. Some teachers like Pearce produced "African" plays on non-contentious issues prior to this period. In 1958 there was an all-African version of *Hamlet*, and in 1961 Adrian Stanley put on an all-black *Macbeth*, but these productions were within the framework of white values and usually under white direction. In 1969 C.J. Wortham's review of the *The State of Theatre in Rhodesia* recorded only one African amateur dramatic society, the "Wankie Dramatic and Choral Society."⁶⁵

There were in fact a few other groups. "The Kamativi African Players" put on *Ndakambokyambira* as early as 1961 at the University's Beit Hall, and the "Chiedza Drama Group" was formed in 1968 to perform Shona plays in the townships. Perhaps the most interesting of the early black experiments in producing an indigenous drama was the comedy of Safirio Madzikatire. Madzikatire started out as a musician but moved into comedy in the mid-Sixties and was soon performing in the Salisbury townships. He then acquired a regular radio-slot, and his work became institutionalised as the *Mukadota Show*. The show featured the "pater-familias" figure of

⁶⁴ Information on this subject and period is not easily available and is scattered amongst a variety of papers. My most useful sources have been the *Tabex Encyclopaedia Zimbabwe*, Jackson's *The Land is Bright* and Mutisi's *Dramatic Performances in Shona*.

⁶⁵ See C.J. Wortham, "The State of Theatre in Zimbabwe," *Zambezia* 1.1 (Salisbury, January 1969): 47–53.

Mukadota himself, as played by Madzikatire. Actors had no scripts. A scenario in *vichekesho* style, often parodying stupid Africans, was outlined by Madzikatire, and performers improvised around the always central role of their leader. In spite of protest by some intellectuals that the Mukadota Show was insulting to blacks, the programme became immensely popular, and from 1982 it was screened on Zimbabwean Television.

Such comedy was actively encouraged by the Rhodesian authorities, who used both radio and television for "development" purposes by putting on vernacular drama which mocked and denigrated "backward" Africans. Their prime venture in this line of entertainment was the serial *Pamberi naPasture*, in which the foolish Pasture was constantly making a fool of himself in contrast with the "developed" and literate Pamberi. This type of drama was not only shown in the national media, but was taken into rural areas by mobile film units.

A slow growth in official black theatre became noticeable from the early Seventies onwards. The Catholic Church sponsored several drama groups, the best-known of which was the "Mabvuka Catholic Youth Club" at Chishawasha. Typically, the club was run by whites and put on mainly biblical plays for public and religious holidays. However, it did tour various high-density suburbs in Salisbury and put on its productions in both Shona and English. Similarly, the Ecumenical Arts Association worked to promote uncontentious writing, music and drama amongst blacks and ran a series of workshops which were a nursery for several now well-known black writers and actors. Finally, the "Tafara Dramatic Society," founded in 1971 by two black Zimbabweans, Godden Gosden and S. Magurupiro, represents something of a continuation of the work of Madzikatire. Tafara mounted open-air theatre shows in the high-density suburbs, improvising around everyday themes of black urban life such as applying for a job, getting on crowded buses, or the arguments so common in beer halls. The audience were charged only a few cents to watch, and all profits were kept for future production needs.

Several specifically black arts competitions were set up during the Sixties and later. The Neshamwari Music and Drama Festival, the annual drama festivals of the College Drama Association and the Rhodesian Association of Youth Clubs, the regional competitions sponsored by such organisations as the Manyikaland, Matabeleland and Mashonaland Drama Associations began to provide a forum for black arts and artists in spite of often rigid and reactionary competition rules. Playwrights such as T.K. Tsodzo and Ben Sibenke first gained recognition for their work at these competitions. However, none of this work was ever allowed to challenge the status quo, and it was an almost exclusively urban phenomenon, whereas the liberation war was being fought and won in the rural areas. Moreover, the white establishment itself, apart from those few liberals actively involved in black arts, gave "moderate"

blacks little encouragement. Black arts events were ignored by the media, and state encouragement remained minimal.

The mediocre quality of much art was exacerbated by the cultural isolation imposed under UDI, which made it virtually impossible to gain access to material about cultural developments both in the liberated areas and in other nations. Several writers such as Musaemura Zimunya and Dover Wilson have pointed out that black and white suffered from a "cultural drought" during this period which resulted in official arts which were both conformist and complacent.⁶⁶

Liberation arts

The arts which came out of the liberation struggle had a dynamism unknown to either the polite world of amateur white performance or to government-approved black productions. Liberation theatre drew on every idea or tradition it could lay its hands on. The spirit-cults experienced a resurgence of popular interest, and their rituals and words were closely attended to by guerrillas and peasants. Traditional instruments, particularly the *mbira*, were revived, and with them came a host of liberation songs employing both old and modern forms to teach the people and strengthen their resolve to fight. At the same time, the colonial religion of Christianity was invoked by nationalist believers, and church tunes were also incorporated in the fighting songs. Many brought with them mission-education ideas of theatre, so that in the schools of the guerrillas and refugees one might see performances of Shakespeare alongside pieces of Marxist agit-prop. Finally, the radicals espoused a wholly secular and socialist art, and this group spawned its own drama and songs for politicisation purposes.

The point was that anything and everything which would strengthen the liberation struggle – the second *chimurenga* – was for the time being allowed. The people responded to a variety of forms and ideas, and although a doctrinaire Marxist might personally disapprove of invoking either traditional or Christian religion, it was obvious that both played as strong a role as political ideology in winning the hearts and minds of the people.

Much of my information in this section comes from Preben Kaarsholm's paper on the place of theatre in the *chimurenga*, but I have also been able to draw on interviews with members of ZIMFEP, the community education project that grew out of the refugee and guerrilla schools which were so important in forming liberation culture.⁶⁷

⁶⁶ See Musaemura Zimunya, *Those Years of Drought and Hunger: The Birth of African Fiction in English in Zimbabwe* (Gweru: Mambo, 1982) and Dover Wilson, "Zimbabwe Theatre. Times are Changing," *Financial Mail* (Harare, August 22, 1980).

⁶⁷ ZIMFEP stands for Zimbabwe Foundation for Education with Production.

The official ideology of both ZANU and ZAPU was secular-socialist, but most of the guerrilla recruits were peasants with strong allegiances to a mixture of Christian and traditional religious practices. Kaarsholm says that traditional songs, dance and rituals were often used to enable homesick young recruits to maintain their links with home and so feel less disturbed in a new environment. However, apart from the well-attested influence of the spirit-cults, traditional performance forms had fallen into abeyance in many areas, and I think they were probably reintroduced to some of the exiles as part of the campaign to invigorate a sense of indigenous cultural values. To encourage unity, the use of all three of Zimbabwe's major languages, English, Ndebele and Shona, was encouraged — a policy carried over into much post-liberation drama in order to break down the linguistic barriers cultivated by the colonists.

At times traditional forms were adapted for the purposes of criticism. Kaarsholm explains how:

In the ZAPU camps in Zambia [...] traditional songs and dances would be performed by school children in intricate attires in praise of Mzilikazi or Lobengula and exploiting the old ambiguity of praise poetry through which adoration can be combined with utterances of criticism of authoritarianism, with the humour and ambiguity now being levelled at unpopular teachers and camp leaders.⁶⁸

Music was undoubtedly the single most popular and effective means of cultural propaganda in the liberation struggle, for songs are infinitely portable and can easily be passed from one person to another, as dance and drama cannot. Alec Pongweni collected hundreds of these songs after independence for his book *Songs That Won the Liberation War*,⁶⁹ a title which in itself makes great claims for the importance of liberation culture. The foreword to this book explains that old tunes and forms were widely used in the songs to pass on contemporary political messages. In this way, tradition could be called upon and cultural pride reasserted while a dynamic political purpose was maintained. This book also points out that not all liberation culture passed in a one-way traffic from the camps of the exiled guerrillas to the home peasantry. Rather, two strands of song-making are identified. Whereas the exiles were able to be openly political, songs which originated within Rhodesia had to use traditional ambiguities in order that their messages be sufficiently elusive to escape comprehension by the authorities. Both kinds of song, however, were powerful tools for arousing political awareness and important in re-awakening the suppressed artistic creativity of the black people.

At the other end of the scale from the traditionalists were the modernists and Marxists. These invested in the medium of dogmatic drama in order to explain how white colonialism could be equated with capitalism and how both must be replaced

⁶⁸ Kaarsholm, *Theatre, Democracy and Cultural Struggle*, 13.

⁶⁹ Alec J.C. Pongweni, *Songs that won the Liberation War* (Harare: College Press, 1982).

by independence and socialism. One play in this vein from a ZANU camp is here summarised by Sr Janice McLoughlin:

A play called "Black is Beautiful" was written and performed in the camps. It depicts an African youth who is so alienated from his culture that he pretends he is "coloured" and is drafted into the settler army. He is eventually captured by the freedom fighters who take him back to his village where he is reunited with his people. The play ends with the freedom fighters telling him to be proud of his people and his culture.⁷⁰

This "telling" rather than suasive drama is a strand of liberation culture which has been carried into independent Zimbabwe, particularly by committed Marxists such as Robert McLaren. Such drama often includes traditional song and dance within its format, but its messages are invariably heavily didactic.

Neither the political dogmatists nor the traditionalists could contain the creativity of many young recruits who came to the camps. Once beyond the constraints of either traditional or colonial control, these young people found themselves questioning those who set themselves up as authority figures. Where this new way of thinking was consciously and creatively articulated it was often via the educational philosophies of Paulo Freire, who advocated that teachers and students learn together and encouraged students to criticise, innovate and become self-reliant. At schools like ZAPU's "Victory Camp" and "J.Z. Moyo" in Zambia, educationalists sought to work in an atmosphere of mutual criticism and anti-authoritarianism. Culture became important in such institutions, not primarily as a means of asserting cultural nationalism or political dogma, but as a channel for demonstrating the pupils' own perceptions of their lives and of the liberation struggle. For pupils, the most widespread instrument of self-expression was now drama – a drama still committed to socialism, but to a participatory and democratic form of socialist practice.

Not everyone appreciated these new educational and cultural ideas. Older cadres sometimes felt that the youth were anarchic and disrespectful. In many instances the new forms evolved spontaneously rather than being consciously developed. The youths who had fled to join the guerrillas were often fired with socialist idealism. They began to assert demands for a democratic society in the coming free state for which they had fought. I have already mentioned students criticising teachers in drama. In some areas pupils apparently waged concentrated campaigns against unpopular camp staff; such measures might go as far as stoning or beating authority figures, but a mocking, critical dramatisation was also a common tool. Such portraits were not intended to be subtle, often caricaturing their targets, but this drama represented a democratic force in the liberation struggle which could not be ignored or easily put down by the guerrillas' leadership.

⁷⁰ Sr Janice McLoughlin, "Creating a New Mentality," *Education in Zimbabwe: Past, Present and Future* (Harare, 1986): 31.

Participation in community drama did not mean that the armed struggle was forgotten. Kaarsholm quotes a former pupil of the J.Z. Moyo school, Attwell Mahena, describing the process of creating political theatre in exile:

Plays were written by students themselves [...] these things were just written on pieces of paper [...] I don't remember seeing anything like full scripts [...] they would think of a situation, a war situation in Zimbabwe [...] and make it in such a way that our forces are on top of the situation and so on, and how the Rhodesia forces are murdering our parents at home and so on. In fact, we didn't have long descriptions and a lot of written work, most of the things came from the heads of the pupils and teachers.⁷¹

Such works were in themselves usually as simplistic as the agit-prop of the hard-line Marxists. The important point is that they were created either by pupils alone or by pupils in cooperation with teachers, and were not handed down from above as received wisdom.

This was a new youth theatre: "the most innovative form of cultural manifestation to emerge within the nationalist counter-culture."⁷² It deeply challenged all forms of authority, both traditional and colonial, which were not based on democratic consensus. It was also a powerful force for mental decolonisation, for it taught individuals to think, articulate and demonstrate their positions for themselves. In post-independence Zimbabwe such theatre was to experience tremendous popularity. It would also cause some anxiety to the new government, as the black state in turn began to assert an authoritarian bias.



⁷¹ Kaarsholm, *Theatre, Democracy and Cultural Struggle*, 16.

⁷² Kaarsholm, *Theatre, Democracy and Cultural Struggle*, 17.

4

A TIME OF HOPE THE THEATRE OF INDEPENDENCE

IN ALL THE COUNTRIES I AM ANALYSING, the radical changes brought about by independence or, in the case of Ethiopia, revolution ushered in a honeymoon period for theatre. In each case dramatists and composers embraced the new freedom to discuss politics openly. Their work was largely celebratory of the new governments and tended to cover common themes – denouncing the old régimes, calling on the spirit of nationalism, and endorsing the policies of the infant “peoples” governments. Such art was relevant in a way that had not been possible under the restrictions of imperial rule. It appealed to hugely increased numbers of participants and audience.

For their part, the politicians, to varying extents, recognised the value of a campaigning, committed cultural movement which reinforced the new governments’ validity. They also recognised the fact that national cultures had a role to play in the assertion of national identity. Newly independent governments therefore supported performers by setting up ministries devoted to the arts, by establishing higher education institutes for specialist training, and by assisting both professional groups and the spread of organised amateur art. Through these programmes the new states also set up structures which could be used to channel the arts, and by increasing artists’ expectation of state support made them more dependent in the long term on government approval.

In each case government commitment to socialism was a crucial factor behind the blossoming of the new art. For example, in Tanzania artistic developments were limited during the nationalist-capitalist period of 1961 to 1967. It was only after Nyerere’s proclamation of *ujamaa* and African socialism in 1967 that we see an explosion of popular political theatre. Socialism gave writers and performers a dynamic structure within which to work and offered a way forward which could appeal to everyone, whereas capitalist policies had difficulty in producing art relevant to more than individual or limited group-interests.

The centralisation of the structures of government was an integral part of these socialist states (all of which operated either a *de facto* or a *de jure* one-party system). This was an important facilitating factor in spreading mass culture. We see the influence of centralised power perhaps most clearly in the agit-prop theatre movement which swept Ethiopia in the late Seventies, producing overtly nationalist-socialist drama through the medium of the mass youth movement REYA (Revolutionary Ethiopian Youth Association), the revolutionary “*kebelles*” (local councils), and rural Peasant’s Associations. It was also evident in the enormous growth of community-theatre groups in Zimbabwe from the mid-Eighties, a movement which grew directly out of the independence struggle.

It would, however, be wrong to suppose that it was only socialist states which saw an expansion in popular political theatre after independence. Pride in newly achieved freedom gave rise to powerful theatrical and literary movements in many African nations. The major difference between the countries I am considering and such states as Egypt and Kenya is that, while all produced plays denouncing imperialism and promoting nationalism, in socialist states the theatre was more likely to see its role as supportive of the state. In capitalist nations initial euphoria waned quickly, political art moved into the role of questioning and combating the politicians, and the state discouraged performers from dealing with political issues. After a short time one can see a return to plays dealing with more individual or purely social issues.

Even within the nations I am considering, the elation of post-independence art and the period of unqualified solidarity with government were limited. As the machinery of the new states became entrenched, it was in all cases perceived to be moving further from identification with the aspirations of the people. Given the heady joy of independence and the enormous expectations of the populace, contrasted with the poverty and problems inherited by newly independent and revolutionary states, one can see by hindsight that the process of disillusionment was inevitable. This chapter will endeavour to chronicle the differing manifestations of artistic euphoria in Tanzania, Ethiopia and Zimbabwe, and to analyse why the idyll came to an end.

TANZANIA¹*Nyerere, nationalism and ujamaa*

The country Julius Nyerere took control of in December 1961 was enormous, poor and under-developed even by African standards. Its new leader's reaction to his problems, only one month after independence, was to resign as Prime Minister in order to spend a year writing and explaining to the people his ideas for independent Tanganyika. This was the period of Nyerere's emergence as "Mwalimu" (teacher), the title by which he is widely known. Yet the policies he took up on his return to power, now as President, in December 1962 were still those of moderate capitalism as advocated by the departing British colonists. Since British expatriates held many key positions in the administration, this was hardly surprising, although Nyerere early on came under heavy pressure to africanise the bureaucracy. In January 1964, this pressure erupted in an army mutiny, with the soldiers demanding higher wages and the replacement of British officers by Tanzanians. Nyerere went into hiding, and sixty British marines arrived at his request to crush the revolt. Only a few months later, in April 1964, after the revolution on Zanzibar, the Tanganyikans took on the added challenge of union with the island-state, and the United Republic of Tanzania was formed. However, the government's problems were multiplying. As a result of africanisation, Tanzania had an acute shortage of trained senior administrators. Trades unions became increasingly militant, until TANU decreed in 1964 that only one union, NUTA (The National Union of Tanganyika), would be allowed, and it had to be affiliated to the Party. The problem was that the people had expected prosperity to follow hard on the heels of independence, but an under-industrialised nation, which quickly got into disputes with such major aid-donors as Britain, the United States and West Germany, had no way to deliver the goods. In 1965, Tanzania became officially a one-party state, but that solved nothing. What Nyerere needed was a coherent strategy to rally the people to build their nation in the common interest. What he came up with in February 1967 was the Arusha Declaration.²

¹ For political information on post-independence Tanzania I have relied on Andrew Coulson's *Tanzania: A Political Economy* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1982); the latter part of Hugh Stephens' *The Political Transformation of Tanganyika: 1920-67* (New York: Praeger, 1968); *The Challenge for Tanzania's Economy* by C.G. Kahama, T.L. Maliyamkono & Stuart Wells (London: James Currey, 1986); and Issa Shivji's two books, *Class Struggles in Tanzania* (Dar es Salaam: Tanzania Publishing House, 1976) and *Law, State and the Working Class in Tanzania* (London: James Currey, 1986).

² For the text of the Arusha Declaration, see Julius K. Nyerere, *Freedom and Socialism* *Ujamaa: A Selection from Writings and Speeches 1965-1967* (Dar es Salaam: Oxford UP, 1968): 231-50.

It would be hard to over-estimate the role that Julius Nyerere played in the formation of Tanzanian socialism. It was his creation. His genius lay in winning the hearts and minds of the whole nation to endorse his plans and rally behind the government. The theory of *ujamaa* or familyhood, as set out in the Arusha Declaration, was based on an idealisation of pre-colonial Africa as a communalist paradise in which everyone worked for the benefit of all in egalitarian agricultural peace. The concept of nation as family was to replace capitalism. Self-help would replace aid-dependency. The state would run larger business in the interests of all, and for the people life would be based on the cooperative *ujamaa* village.³ The idealism of this vision was underpinned by a recognition of many of the hard facts of Tanzania's economic plight. The call for self-help was necessary when aid-donors had withdrawn support and the country could hope to attract only very limited business investment. Idealisation of the communalist past took into account the fact that over ninety percent of Tanzanians were still living in the rural areas and that the nation was dependent on the peasantry for both food and the cash crops which provided the bulk of foreign exchange. Villagisation, nationalisation and the exaltation of the family enabled the party-run state to strengthen its control over all levels of society, and made Nyerere the wise, authoritarian "*Baba wa Taifa*" (Father of the Nation), another title commonly used to denote the President.

What Nyerere could not predict was the enormous wave of enthusiasm which greeted the Arusha Declaration. Quite spontaneously, groups of youths started to march on the northern town of Arusha in solidarity with the President. He himself had to join the marchers in order to control their enthusiasm, and finally to curb it by declaring that once the walking was done the work must begin. Nyerere's gift to Tanzania was a proud, self-reliant sense of national identity before which all could feel equal. He also raised the status of both TANU and himself, so that the state and its leader became not only enormously powerful, but also more cleverly, enormously beloved.

*Early post-independence theatre 1961–1967*⁴

The major change I have made is to get up an entirely new Ministry: the Ministry of National Culture and Youth. I have done this because I believe that its culture is the spirit and essence of any nation [...]

³ Nyerere's vision of the *ujamaa* village is most fully explained in "Socialism and Rural Development," a paper produced in September 1967 and published in *Freedom and Socialism*, 337–66.

⁴ My main sources of information on Tanzanian theatre between 1961 and 1967 were Ebrahim Hussein's "On the Development of Theatre in East Africa," ch. 2, and Amandina Lihamba's "Politics and Theatre in Tanzania after the Arusha Declaration," ch. 1.

Of all the crimes of colonialism there is none worse than the attempt to make us believe we had no indigenous culture of our own; or that what we did have was worthless – something of which we should be ashamed, instead of a source of pride.

Some of us, particularly those of us who acquired a European type of education, set ourselves out to prove to our colonial rulers that we had become “civilized”; and by that we meant that we had abandoned everything connected with our own past and learnt to imitate only European ways [....]

I don’t want anybody to imagine that to revive our own culture means at the same time to reject that of any other country. A nation which refuses to learn from foreign cultures is nothing but a nation of idiots and lunatics [....] But to learn from other cultures does not mean we should abandon our own.

(Julius Nyerere, President’s Inaugural Address, November, 1962)⁵

Although Julius Nyerere is a well-read man and a Shakespeare enthusiast, his public pronouncements on the role of culture in Tanzania have been few. The speech quoted above has therefore been, perforce, the basis from which Tanzanian theorists have worked when arguing whether or not the country has ever possessed a coherent cultural policy. All the indications are that the state has not felt a need to implicate culture in the process of politicising the people except at a very basic level, often for little more than the creation of slogans. Indeed, those who have sought to use theatre as a serious instrument of socio-political discussion have been treated with some suspicion. What culture has been promoted has been predominantly that which builds unity, primarily through the use of the Kiswahili language and, secondly, by the parroting of party dogma. In spite of Nyerere’s worthy rhetoric, development for Tanzania has seldom been seen to include a more than nominal role for culture.

Prior to the Arusha Declaration the politicians did not even have a coherent direction in which to steer this culture. The new Ministry of Culture and Youth was very small and by 1964 had been subsumed into the much larger Ministry of Community Development. From the beginning it put its major efforts into the safe entertainment form of *ngoma*. A National Dance Group was set up with a mandate to preserve ethnic dances, to promote modern dance, and to build on the dance-drama tradition; but the first of these, and the least contentious objective received the bulk of attention.

Drama and dance in schools continued on the ad-hoc basis that had prevailed prior to independence. Although officially school drama was encouraged, the annual national competition was left in the hands of the British Council. Moreover, most of the competitors still came from around Dar es Salaam, so the competition was hardly nationally representative. The only other performance development of this period was the beginning of cultural groups sponsored by state-run organisations.

⁵ “President’s Inaugural Address” in Julius K. Nyerere, *Freedom and Unity: A Selection from Writings and Speeches 1952–1962* (Dar es Salaam: Oxford UP, 1966): 186–87.

The "Urafiki Drama Club"⁶ and "Tanganyika Textiles"⁷ were both set up in 1964, and concentrated on adapting the *vichekesho* form. The Tanganyika Textiles group was particularly innovative. Led by Peter Saimanga, who was influential in various school and university drama productions, workers from Tanganyika Textiles developed an unusually biting form of satiric, political *vichekesho*. Otherwise there is little indication that the state had any interest in developing either Western-style or indigenous performance forms. Only with the Arusha Declaration would either artists or politicians find a politically important role for the arts.

*The impetus of Arusha*⁸

In discussing post-Arusha theatre, it is most important to take into account the influence of two opinion-forming groups in Tanzania: party ideologues and university-based intellectuals. Although the two may at times engage in bitter dispute they are closely linked, to a degree interdependent, and even on occasion the same people.

Here one has to understand a fundamental difference between power structures in countries like Tanzania, Ethiopia and Zimbabwe, and in the capitalist West. The Tanzanian radical lawyer, Issa Shivji, designates the Tanzanian government as a "bureaucratic bourgeoisie."⁹ That is, the state is run by and for bureaucrats who are supposed to (although in many cases they may not) give up individual wealth in the interests of their group, which is effectively the hegemonic class and the state. These ruling bureaucrats are drawn almost exclusively from a very small educated élite and are likely to have attended the same few top schools and the same institutes of higher education. In the case of Tanzania, this would have meant Makerere University¹⁰ in colonial and early independence days and later the University of Dar es Salaam. What this élite does not have direct access to is money. Commerce is sidelined (a situation more obvious in Tanzania, where the Asian population controls a

⁶ "Urafiki" is the name of the state owned textile mill in Ubungo, Dar es Salaam.

⁷ Tanganyika Textiles was a state-owned manufacturer of cottons.

⁸ After 1967 there is a great proliferation of writings on Tanzanian theatre. Undoubtedly my most useful source-document for this period is Lihamba's "Politics and Theatre in Tanzania after the Arusha Declaration," which provides the only comprehensive survey of modern Tanzanian drama. However, Hussein's, Muhando's and Philipson's doctorates were also useful, as was J.N. Binhanze's "African Drama: A Call For Change," in *Umma* 1.2 (Dar es Salaam, December 1971): 7-11; John Carthew & Farouk Topan, "Drama in Tanzanian Schools," in *Tanzanian Notes and Records* (Dar es Salaam, 1969): 70; and the issue of *Utafiti* devoted to theatre (Dar es Salaam, 1985): 1.

⁹ See Shivji, *Class Struggles in Tanzania*.

¹⁰ Makerere University is in Uganda. It was set up during the colonial period as a university for the whole of East Africa. The few Tanzanians who gained a university place prior to 1961 almost all attended Makerere.

large proportion of commerce but has minimal involvement in government), whereas industry is controlled collectively by the state. Power is maintained through an alliance, not with business or the working class as in either conventional capitalism or communism, but with the peasantry, with whom the government seek to identify themselves by means of a mass party. The bureaucratic bourgeoisie, through the party, thus wield power. They run the state with a "top-down" structure, while maintaining a façade of popular democracy via the party which enables them to label any challenge to the state as a subversive act.

In the late Sixties and early Seventies the University of Dar es Salaam established itself as a powerhouse of left-wing thought on the African continent. Many socialist intellectuals from abroad were attracted by Nyerere's *ujamaa* to come and work as lecturers, and both staff and students were consequently radicalised. This was particularly easy, because the University had only opened in 1961, and many new departments were created throughout the Sixties under specifically socialist mandates. However, the influence of Western radical teachers meant that the University was often to the left of the government, a situation which was to bring about increasing strife between party and intelligentsia. The seeds of this division can be seen from the early Seventies on in the world of theatre.

When the University Department of Theatre was first set up in 1967 it was overwhelmingly supportive of government. In the early Seventies we see an outpouring of theoretical writings on the proper way to create socialist or nationalist African theatres by such as the South African Bob Leshoai and the German Joachim Fiebach, who taught at the University, and Uganda's Mukotani Ruyendo, who was a student in the Department. All were concerned to re-assert the supremacy of indigenous cultural forms over what were viewed as the Western élitist dramatic styles then taught in Tanzanian schools. Art was not to deal with matters affecting the individual, but with broader societal issues. Above all, these writers drew on a mixture of Western socialist theory and the pedagogic traditions of much African art to assert that the new theatre must have a strong didactic focus.

These men, and their Tanzanian protégés who subsequently taught in the Department, Ebrahim Hussein, Penina Mlamba and Amandina Lihamba, were all concerned to widen the appeal of drama by writing in Kiswahili and incorporating traditional elements of dance, song and story-telling. However, it is important to note that all, with the exception of Fiebach, were primarily important playwrights. This situation has, I believe, resulted in a bias towards drama over other performance forms within the intellectual theatre community. Although the University has sponsored more investigation into traditional performance forms than any other centre I am considering, the emphasis of the Department, both theoretically and practically, has still been on drama. Other forms are to be incorporated within plays, but this does not take into account the fact that outside the University the eclectic

mixture of traditional performance forms described in previous chapters still has a much more powerful hold over the people than drama, or that the government itself has often seemed more concerned with these traditional areas than with drama.

The nationalist enthusiasm and sense of direction generated by the Arusha Declaration cried out for artistic celebration. By far the most popular and most promoted performance form was, and remains, *ngoma*. The government has encouraged *ngoma* through regional and national competitions, and *ngoma* is the entertainment form most frequently mustered to entertain visiting dignitaries on official occasions. From the several-hour-long dances, still performed in the villages, these state-supported *ngomas* have become much shorter, each dance lasting on average around fifteen minutes, with the dances changed from a circular to a linear format. The songs accompanying the dance, whether war-dance or harvest celebration, have been adapted to make political points by becoming praise-songs to party and government. The nationwide enthusiasm for Nyerere and the Arusha Declaration meant that this development was probably originally spontaneous, but the tradition has now become entrenched. At all public and commercial performances the songs are inevitably somewhat trite praise-verses, such as this chant composed by the commercial troupe "DDC Kibisa"¹¹ in the early Eighties:

Chama chama chama chama

Cha mapinduzi Tanzania

*Ei Chama Tanzania.*¹²

(Party, party, party, party

Of the revolution, Tanzania

Ei party of Tanzania.)

(Note: Chama Cha Mapinduzi [CCM] – Party of the Revolution – is the title of the present party, which succeeded TANU in 1977.)

Following the Arusha Declaration, *kwaya* groups and bands also composed an enormous number of songs explaining and supporting government policy. For them, too, TANU set up competitions and festivals which consolidated links between art and the party. Possibly one sign of the depth of this link is the fact that it is still common for a commercial dance to end, not with the national anthem, but with a quick burst of the party song, to which dancers will clap a rhythmic accompaniment.

The most extraordinary artistic departure directly resulting from the Arusha Declaration was the evolution of a largely new form, "*ngonjera*." *Ngonjera* is a dramatic form unique to Tanzania. It arose out of the verse-dialogue poetry common to Kiswahili and to several other Tanzanian ethnic groups. To Western ears it sounds rather like a Platonic discussion in poem form. Popularised by Mathias Mnyampala,

¹¹ DDC Kibisa is the cultural troupe attached to Dar es Salaam City Council.

¹² E.M. Songoyi, *Commercialization: Its Impact on Traditional Dances*, 38.

ngonjera was created specifically to teach people the messages of the Arusha Declaration. Mnyampala wrote all his *ngonjera* on the subjects of either Arusha or TANU, and the form is essentially didactic. The classic form of *ngonjera*, following Kiswahili prosodic rules, is to have two people developing an argument. The politically “correct” disputant is much wiser than the “fool” who challenges him, and the fool is converted by the end of the poem to “proper” political thinking.¹³

In the late Sixties many intellectuals and Party cadres started to write *ngonjera*, which came to be assigned a category of its own in national arts competitions. Against the will of the Kiswahili purists, *ngonjera* broadened its form and now encompasses both monologues and disputes involving several parties. The poems also grew in length. Initially they were short, ten- to fifteen-minutes pieces, but contemporary *ngonjera* may last for hours and are often serialised on the radio. *Ngonjera* are written for dramatisation. Over the years, complexity of presentation has developed, notably with an increasing prevalence of comic elements. What has not changed is the range of purposes which *ngonjera* may serve. It is essentially a state art-form, serving the party and explaining the party-line on topical issues, with minimal critical analysis of government positions.

The intellectual drama

All these forms were encouraged by government, but the intellectual community were directly involved only in *ngonjera* and drama. What the Theatre Department wanted was not to become involved in promoting traditional arts *per se*, but to adapt and integrate these with drama to provide a more intellectually complex performance form which still retained its relevance to the mass of the people. Here we have to take into account the fact that up until the time of the Arusha Declaration indigenous drama had been almost non-existent in Tanzania. The first analysis of early vernacular Tanzanian drama was provided by Ebrahim Hussein, a man who taught at Dar es Salaam University for many years and has become the country’s most eminent playwright. He holds a position which is analogous artistically, if not politically, to Ethiopia’s Tsegaye Gebre-Medhin. Hussein’s “Annotated Bibliography of Swahili Theatre”¹⁴ was published in 1969 and offers a very broad definition of theatre, including dramatic *ngomas* and a range of school plays. Altogether there are twenty-three entries, only five of which concern published works.

The first published Tanzanian play was Hussein’s own *Wakati Ukuta* (Time is a Wall), which appeared in the University magazine *DarLite* in 1967. As with several

¹³ For further information on *ngonjera*, see Lihamba, “Politics and Theatre in Tanzania after the Arusha Declaration,” ch. 4.

¹⁴ Ebrahim Hussein, “An Annotated Bibliography of Swahili Theatre,” *Swahili* 2.2 (Dar es Salaam, 1969).

of the very earliest plays, socialism had not yet been overtly embraced. Love was a major issue, as in other works of this time such as G. Uhinga's *Rejalla* (*DarLite* 3.1; Dar es Salaam, 1969) and the unpublished *Asiyesikia la Mkuu Huvunjika Guu* (He Who Does Not Listen to His Elders' Advice Comes to Grief, 1969/69), by M. Mohamed. This bias is particularly noticeable, as later works often avoid the theme of love entirely, on the grounds that it is a bourgeois topic, not useful in constructing the socialist state. However, these early plays do all address serious social issues and use love-problems to demonstrate conflict between different groups. In *Wakati Ukuta* the conflict is between old and new ways as exemplified by the tension between the conservative parents of the heroine, Tatu, and her ultra-westernised husband, Swai. The play is ultimately a plea for moderation and tolerance; everything changes with time, but change cannot be unduly hurried.

Rejalla looks at the problems of a love-affair between the African, Juma, and a Tanzanian Asian girl, Rejalla, while *Asiyesikia la Mkuu Huvunjika Guu* examines lovers who try to escape from the bonds of a traditional Muslim marriage but end up capitulating to the forces of conservatism. Pleas for tolerance and the examination of culture-gaps opening up between traditional and modern ways are common themes for African writers of this period throughout the continent. The evils of rejecting the old ways entirely are examined in Uhinga's *Martin Kayamba* (*DarLite* 2.2; Dar es Salaam, 1968) and M.H. Abdulaziz's *Zabibu Na Wazee Wake* (Zabibu and his Parents; *Swahili* 39.1–2; Dar es Salaam, 1969). Martin Kayamba is a historical figure, frequently reviled, as he is in this play, for taking on the role of a "Black European."¹⁵ Zabibu is a fictional character who is similarly a target of opprobrium because of his élitist values and superior attitude towards his family. Several critics have noted that these early plays have a form which is imitative of Western realist theatre.¹⁶ Experiments with new forms were to emanate mostly from the University in the Seventies; but first came the movement from social to overtly political drama.

The first clearly political drama was Crispin Hauli's *Dunia Iliyofarakana* (The Chaotic World; *DarLite* 3.2; Dar es Salaam, 1969). The play is set in an unnamed African state in its first decade of independence. A small group of top politicians live in luxury, isolated from the mass of the people, and this situation leads to a military coup. However, the peasantry remain sceptical of the new leadership and claim that life stays the same for them whichever group is in power. The play is unusual for the time in its cynicism of approach, and it is possibly looking back to the

¹⁵ For further information on Martin Kayamba, see Coulson, *Tanzania: A Political Economy*, 102–104.

¹⁶ See Lihamba, "Politics and Theatre after the Arusha Declaration," ch. 4, and Mlama's "Tanzanian Traditional Theatre as a Pedagogic Institution," ch. 1.

confusions of the pre-Arusha period, as well as to political upheavals in other parts of Africa.

What is most noteworthy about *Dunia Iliyofarakana* is that it represents a new style of presentation. Hussein comments that

as far as form is concerned *Dunia Iliyofarakana* is, perhaps, the first play to break away from drawing room esthetics. The events find their causality in a fable that is conditioned by historical events and not by bourgeois esthetic [sic] principles. This merit, however, is marred by the lack of artistic power of conviction and by the lack of depth of the thematic.¹⁷

Amandina Lihamba agrees that themes and characters are simplistic, but argues that we must understand that

the pre-occupation of writers at the end of the sixties was “what” to say using theatre and not “how” to say it. The writer was therefore characteristically more concerned in portraying the conflicts of neo-colonialism in a straightforward manner so that there would be no confusion as to who were the politically good and bad guys.¹⁸

This movement towards an agit-prop style of drama, concerned to portray graphically its socialist messages with, at times, little concern for artistic credibility, can be seen in other works of the late Sixties and early Seventies. The Seventies are the decade of pro-*ujamaa* plays, produced mainly by a new generation of university graduates who emerged convinced of the ideals of Nyerere’s socialism. Penina Mlama is probably the best-known of this group, but all produced plays closely following the party-line.

Villagisation was a key issue picked up in many plays. The villagisation campaign came into force in 1967. The idea was that the bulk of the population should live in cooperative villages, away from the corrupting influence of the city. The people would engage in a self-help programme to raise everyone’s standard of living equally. In this programme one can see a reflection of the belief, already discussed in Ethiopian plays, that the country is a source of purity in contrast to corrupt westernised city life. When villagisation changed from a voluntary to an enforced policy from 1973 onwards, and the Party bureaucrats undercut some genuine self-help attempts in the name of ideological conformity,¹⁹ the programme began to fall into disrepute, but in the early days it was joyfully embraced by many intellectual writers (none of whom actually went to live in an *ujamaa* village).

Penina Mlama’s *Hatia* (Guilt), Ngaliamecha Ngahyoma’s *Huka* (Huka), K.K. Kahigi and A.A. Hgemo’s *Lengo Letu* (Our Objective), Emmanuel Mbogo’s *Giza*

¹⁷ Hussein, “On the Development of Theatre,” 19.

¹⁸ Lihamba, *Politics and Theatre*, 207.

¹⁹ See Coulson, *Tanzania: A Political Economy*, ch. 22 and Appendix, “The Ruvuma Development Association.”

Limeingia (The Dawn of Darkness), Gervas Moshiro's *Chama Chetu* (Our Party), Ngalimecha Ngahyoma's *Kijiji Mfanobora* (A Model Village) and G.Z. Kaduma's *The Canker* all advocate villagisation.²⁰ These plays fall into two broad categories. The first four deal with poor people who are betrayed, usually sexually, by someone from the city, and end up seeking a new life in an *ujamaa* village. Mlama's *Hatia*, published in 1972, is a prime example of such plays and has frequently featured on the secondary-school literature curriculum. *Hatia* features Cheja, a woman who is jilted by her lover from Dar es Salaam after he has made her pregnant. She tries to cover up her guilt by returning to her natal village and accusing a well-off older man of seducing her. After a trial scene, Cheja finally confesses to her lie and decides to seek a new beginning in an *ujamaa* village. The play shows a gradation in virtue: the city is the place of betrayal, while the traditional village offers a normal mixture of good and bad, but the *ujamaa* village is the source of redemption for the sinner. As Lihamba complains, the message is all important even when it defies credibility:

Muhando displays her ideological enthusiasm by providing a solution which is outside the logical progression of the events in the play. Cheja's last decision, for example, is quite contrary to the character portrayed up to that point [...] Cheja is shown to be a weak character who is indecisive and quite confused.²¹

The second strand to these plays, dealt with by the second group of four plays listed above, addresses the problems of corrupt and, at times, reactionary local leaders, who betray the ideals of *ujamaa* and have to be either ejected or reformed before the village can function properly. Again many of these works are very simplistic. Possibly the most interesting is G.Z. Kaduma's dance-drama, *The Canker*, which was performed in 1970. Kaduma was a teacher in the Theatre Department and a trained choreographer. The play, which employed modern dance-styles, toured widely within Tanzania and later in East Africa and Japan. It draws on the traditional symbol of evil, the witch, who here is responsible for the afflictions of the *ujamaa* village. The witch is punished, but significantly she is finally converted to the ideals of *ujamaa*. In this play we see an interest in new performance styles. But it is also important that, from the early Seventies, there was an increasing interest in the reconciliation of traditional entertainment styles with Western drama, and this was to become a matter of increasing concern to the intellectual playwrights.

²⁰ P. Mlama, *Hatia* (Nairobi: East African Publishing House, 1976); N. Ngahyoma, *Huka* (Dar es Salaam: Tanzania Publishing House, 1975); K.K. Kahigi & A.A. Ngemero, *Lengo Letu* (Dar es Salaam, 1972); E. Mbogo, *Giza Limeingia* (Dar es Salaam: Tanzania Publishing House, 1980); G. Moshiro, "Chama ni Chetu," (Our Party) in *Umma* 1.1 (Dar es Salaam, 1970): 30–47; N. Ngahyoma, *Kijiji Mfanobora* (Dar es Salaam: Tanzania Publishing House, 1975); G.Z. Kaduma, *The Canker* (performed 1970), unpublished.

²¹ Lihamba, "Politics and Theatre," 238–39.

Glorification of peasant life goes hand-in-hand with criticism of things urban, particularly urban élites. Kaduma's *Dhamana* (Pledge),²² first performed in 1975, looks at class attitudes to education and contrasts the view of the peasantry, who see education as a means of improving their lot in life, with the blasé attitude of the children of the bourgeoisie, who rely on family connections to help them get ahead. Dealing with a related issue, Mlama's *Pambo* (Ornament),²³ published in 1975, examines the plight of a young graduate who goes insane when his education does not lead to the privileged life he expects as a right. Both of these plays reveal increasing complexity of viewpoint (concern as to how the state can educate its children without alienating them from their roots and from the less privileged), an increasing use of dance, traditional and poetic imagery, and symbolism, demonstrating a growing awareness of the need to experiment with form in order to make performances more accessible to a non-élite audience.

Tanzania's two most illustrious playwrights, Ebrahim Hussein and Penina Mlama, both chose to draw on history for subject matter in the early Seventies. This is a common practice in post-liberation African drama. The dramatist asserts continuity with a past which can now be reclaimed from colonial denigration, and uses this past in an allegorical way to make points about the present. Moreover, as playwrights become more aware of the need to use traditional performance elements within their drama, setting a play in the past is a simple way of incorporating at least some traditional trappings within the script.

Penina Mlama's *Tambueni Haki Zetu* (Recognise Our Rights),²⁴ written in 1972, is an obvious allegory celebrating liberation. In the play, Mundewa has died and is seeking to gain admittance to the spirit-world. However, Schulu, the leader of the spirits, is reluctant to let him in because Mundewa was instrumental in breaking an ancestral treaty of friendship with neighbouring tribes, the Waboma and Wakusa.²⁵ Mundewa argues that the Waboma had been oppressing his people, the Watone, and that the Watone were therefore obliged to fight for their freedom. When the spirits reject this argument Mundewa forces his way into the spirit-world and successfully claims his place amongst the ancestors.

This play is based on an actual historical conflict between two tribes from Mlama's home region of Morogoro, and it is a development from the more blatant agit-prop of less talented writers. Still, Mlama's political commitment downgrades any purely personal relationship. The Watone are a metaphor for TANU and their

²² G.Z. Kaduma, *Dhamana* (Dar es Salaam, 1980).

²³ P. Mlama, *Pambo* (Nairobi: Foundation Books, 1975).

²⁴ P. Mlama, *Tambueni Haki Zetu* (Dar es Salaam: Tanzania Publishing House, 1973).

²⁵ "Wa" is the prefix used in Kiswahili as in "the people of." Hence the Waswahili are the people of the Swahili ethnic group.

struggle takes priority, while a potentially interesting personal relationship developed in the early part of the play peters out without any convincing analysis. The personal is seen as irrelevant in the context of broader political considerations. Lihamba also points out that although at this time

writers and composers of plays were [...] concerned about giving traditional flavour to the plays by incorporating dances, songs, chants, etc. [they] were not yet concerned about finding an alternative to the proscenium as performance space.²⁶

Mugyabuso Mulokozi's *Mukwawa wa Uhehe* (Mukwawa of the Hehe), Edwin Semzaba's *Tendehogo* (Tendehogo) and D.H. Mgange's *Dira ya Shujaa* (The Hero's Compass) also exalt the past and tie the present in with past liberation struggles.²⁷ However, the most subtle of all these historical-liberation plays is undoubtedly Ebrahim Hussein's *Kinjeketile* (Kinjeketile).²⁸

Kinjeketile is Hussein's only play to have been translated into English and is his most popular work. It tells the story of the Maji Maji rebellion of 1905–1907 in south-west Tanzania and shows how, for the first time, many tribes came together to fight off colonial oppression. In a manner similar to Tsegaye Gebre-Medhin's *Tewodros*, *Kinjeketile* is overtly a simple patriotic play, advocating national unity and glorifying the battles of the past. Yet, again like *Tewodros*, *Kinjeketile* is more subtle in its message than it at first appears.

The whole uprising depends on whether or not *Kinjeketile* has been possessed by a spirit who tells him that a blessing with "maji" (water) will protect the rebels from German bullets. Since we know that the water did not, in fact, protect the people, the whole basis of the play could be dismissed as primitive superstition. This is all the more likely as possession is a subject not naturally compatible with socialist theories. The matter is further complicated by the prophecy the spirit makes to *Kinjeketile*, implying that after the Germans have been defeated the Arabs will once more rule over Tanzania. Obviously the fighters do not wish to battle off one oppressor merely to be saddled with another. Yet without *Kinjeketile*'s possession and the blessing of the maji the tribes would never have come together to fight their common enemy, which is the only way they could hope to find freedom. *Kinjeketile* is at one point asked whether the spirit that possesses him is the same as the benevolent spirit of a neighbouring tribe. The answer is crucial in winning the allegiance of these people to the common cause and, in spite of his doubts, *Kinjeketile*, now as man not medium, has to make a choice, and answers in the affirmative.

²⁶ Lihamba, "Politics and Theatre," 183.

²⁷ M. Mulokozi, *Makwawa wa Uhehe* (Dar es Salaam: Dar es Salaam UP, 1988); E. Semzaba, *Tendehogo* (Dar es Salaam, 1980); D.H. Mgange, *Dira ya Shujaa* (Dar es Salaam: Tanzania Publishing House, 1977).

²⁸ Ebrahim Hussein, *Kinjeketile* (Dar es Salaam: Oxford UP, 1970).

The end of the play comes after a battle which leaves the rebels utterly defeated. Kinjeketile has previously been captured by the Germans, who want him to save his life by publicly retracting his prophecy:

Kitunda Was the water true? Did you believe in it?

(*Kinjeketile laughs long and bitterly. A Pause.*)

Kinjeketile Do you know what they will say tomorrow? The officers will tell the children – our children, Kitunda – that we were wrong. Fighting is wrong? Fighting for one's country would be wrong? And he wants me to help him by retracting all that I said. No. If I said that tomorrow, people in the north and south would stop fighting. They would fall into hopeless despair. No! I will not say that. A word has been born. Our children will tell it to their children. Our grandchildren will hear it. One day the word will cease to be a dream, it will be reality.

(*The policeman enters, followed by the German officer.*)

Policeman Are you ready?

Kinjeketile Ready.

Kitunda What is the decision?

(*Kinjeketile doesn't answer.*)

Officer Has he agreed?

(*Kitunda shakes his head. Blackout.*)²⁹

The truth of Kinjeketile's words (if they are true) may lie in the essence of the idea of a multi-tribal uprising rather than in the literal truth of the water's protective qualities. Yet, even if we take the play on this level of spiritual truth, as Kinjeketile's final speech surely implies we should, then, as Philipson points out, the "silences and cross conversations undercut the revolutionary fervour of Kinjeketile's statement."³⁰

Hussein's period of wholehearted commitment to socialist ideals was possibly shorter than that of any other significant Tanzanian playwright. Although his doctoral thesis of 1974 betrays a generally Marxist tone, it is a piece of work far inferior to his dramatic writing of the period, and one has to take into account the fact that the thesis was written in English in East Germany.³¹ What we see in *Kinjeketile* is an attitude which questions acceptance of any overall system. Hussein implies that maybe Nyerere's *ujamaa* needs questioning as much as Kinjeketile's possession by the spirit Hongo. Moreover, in this play, unlike that of *Mlama*, the

²⁹ Hussein, *Kinjeketile*, section 1.

³⁰ Philipson, "Drama and National Culture," 109.

³¹ I have known several Africans who wrote post-graduate theses at Humboldt University in the former East Germany. All argued in a more classically Marxist vein than their personal political beliefs would warrant.

human factor is vital. Kinjeketile the man is as interesting and important to the play as Kinjeketile, the vehicle of an ideology.

The hub of this new drama was the University. The influence of foreign staff was vital both to the number of plays produced (forty-one between 1967 and 1976), and to the radical tone taken. The plays mounted were a variety of foreign, local and original pieces, although Lihamba has estimated that three-fifths of the works were in English, and these can only ever have appealed to an educated audience.³² Still, it is important to note that this work did not emanate solely from the Theatre Department. Enthusiasm for new ways to express the sense of national optimism prompted the emergence of a variety of staff and student arts groups which put on plays, both on campus and on tour.

The Theatre Department itself was committed to taking plays out to the people. Initially, funding for the Department was reasonably generous, and extensive tours of plays like *Hatia* and *Kinjeketile* were undertaken in vacations. These travelled as far north as Moshi and, on occasion, right across to Lake Victoria. The Department's philosophy was that art should be a free teaching resource. Where charges were made, they were minimal, and touring became heavily dependent on state support. This issue gradually produced disillusionment with the government, for, while the Ministry of Culture continued to produce rhetoric about the importance of culture, the lowly status accorded to the arts by the state is reflected in the fact that between 1968 and 1974 responsibility for culture was shifted among no less than three ministries. Plans for a series of regional cultural resource centres and a theatre hall at the University never got off the ground. Few plays were published by the state publishing house, and it became evident that government interest in the intellectuals' plans for taking their drama out to the populace was minimal. Throughout the Seventies, funding for tours became ever harder to find, and as economic conditions failed to improve and idealism waned most of the University theatre groups folded.

Several writers have recorded the process of intellectual disillusion with government from the mid-Seventies onwards.³³ The élite, whether politicians, businessmen or academics, began to be widely seen as corrupt. It was evident that villagisation had run into many problems, and a widening gap became apparent between the government with its Nyerere-led, experimental approach to a specifically African socialism and the desire of many radical intellectuals to embrace a more classically Marxist line of development. Some plays uncritically endorsing

³² See Lihamba, "Politics and Theatre," ch. 5.

³³ See Lihamba, "Politics and Theatre," ch. 4; Coulson, *Tanzania: A Political Economy*, ch. 21; and Chris Peter & Sengondo Mvungi, "The State and Student Struggles," ch. 7 of *The State and the Working People in Tanzania*, ed. Issa G. Shivji.

state politics continued to be written by members of the intelligentsia into the Eighties, but from the early Eighties there was an increasing trend towards a more critical drama.

Government-sponsored theatre

Fundamentally, state policy during this period was to increasingly sideline the intellectuals and their vision of a highly skilled and analytical drama, and to concentrate instead, via two avenues of approach, on limited promotion of simple, uncontentious and politically conformist art. First, cultural troupes were encouraged, both in villages and attached to parastatal companies; second, there was an expansion of the competitions which had already been established under colonial rule. The major exceptions to this policy were the University itself and the state arts troupes, which were centrally funded. The National Dance Troupe had been set up as early as 1963. It was followed in 1968 by an acrobatic team trained in China; finally, in 1974, a National Drama Troupe was established. All these groups were based in Dar es Salaam, but the idea was that they should tour the country as models of excellence for others to emulate. Their work was heavily committed to supporting the government, and it is noteworthy that, even in the drama troupe, performers were not drawn from the radical intelligentsia, but from less-educated "raw" recruits. If we can assume that both the University groups and the National Troupes reached only limited audiences, chiefly students, who were themselves an élite, the only state-supported arts that could reach a wide variety of the people were the cultural troupes and participants and audiences of state-run competitions.

Cultural troupes were and are heavily concentrated in Dar es Salaam, although some short-lived groups were started in *ujamaa* villages. Most successful troupes started at workplaces, and the early performers were the workers themselves. These commonly put on a type of variety show, broader-based but otherwise analogous to the work done by Ethiopian professional *kinet* groups. *Ngoma*, *kwaya*, *taraab*, acrobatics and brief improvised plays made up the performances, which customarily lasted for several hours. Initially, performances were usually free, but gradually participants and troupe leaders realised that their entertainments were commercially viable, and a slow move was made towards professionalisation.

Most of the troupes were born out of the enthusiasm generated by *ujamaa*. Encouraged by government, their work was strongly supportive of the state. Songs were written in praise of TANU and Nyerere, whilst plays were highly topical, improvised around a bare scenario with little rehearsal, and generally utilising *vichekesho* techniques to commend the latest party initiatives and policies. The early plays tended to take as their prime targets exploiters, anti-*ujamaa* elements and reactionaries with anti-development attitudes. In all cases the story-line was simple and the

piece was usually played for laughs. This combination of fervent nationalism and support for the government, spiced with comedy, music and up-dated traditional forms, rapidly became popular in an urban environment starved of live entertainment. Performers became full-time professionals, putting on up to eight shows a week, and beer halls were the venues more and more commonly adapted to serve as performance spaces. The audience was composed of a broad cross-section of society, with whole families attending the popular weekend afternoon performances. Government also appreciated these new entertainers, who were less demanding than the intellectuals. The habit was rapidly instituted of calling on the parastatal troupes, often at very short notice, to provide entertainment free of charge for state occasions and visiting dignitaries.

The proliferation of arts competitions as the principal means chosen by the state to promote amateur performance has been a continuing source of contention among drama theorists, who argue that competition is not conducive to good art and the free exchange of ideas. Moreover, a competition requires a judge, and since these are usually drawn from Ministry personnel, there have been frequent accusations that political conformity has a higher value put on it than artistic excellence, and that experimentation with either form or content has become a sure way of losing marks. The idea of using competition as the prime means of promoting art was lifted straight from colonial practice, apparently with little consideration of any alternative. At best, this indicates a lack of innovative will among those responsible for artistic promotion.

In 1967, the Youth Drama Association was formed to take over the British Council's function as patron of amateur drama. Annual competitions were open to schools, clubs and other recognised organisations. Following national policy, Kiswahili was promoted, and gradually took over from English as the medium in which plays were performed. As Hussein's bibliography points out, much new and mainly improvised drama came out of these predominantly school groups. However, two external judges of the 1969 competition, John Carthew and Farouk Topan, were searing about the standard of presentation and lack of formal innovation: "Directors," they complained, "failed to raise [sic] to the challenge which they had set themselves. For, instead of presenting African plays in an African (or at least non-European) way, directors were still in the straightjacket of the old – indeed, outdated – European methods of production."³⁴ A crude form of naturalism acted on a proscenium-arch stage remained prevalent (as indeed it does in recent Tanzanian school productions I have seen). The judges also noted that there seemed to be a greater concern for technical considerations, such as the set and lighting, than for acting quality.

³⁴ John Carthew & Farouk Topan, "Drama in Tanzanian Schools," 70.

Drama, however, was only one of the art-forms sponsored by government in these competitions. The present National Arts and Language Competition has sections for *ngoma*, *ngonjera*, *kwaya*, craft, music and riddling as well as drama. After the Arusha Declaration secondary schools were required to set up drama, folklore and Kiswahili clubs, but the level of activity level here depended largely on individual teachers, few of whom had any arts training. Such activities remained extracurricular. However, every primary school had an *ngoma* troupe.

Increasingly, the basic complaint made by academics was that the government – and here state and party are for all practical purposes interchangeable – not only paid little attention to a possible role for the arts in national development but that, where it did promote the arts, it was always the least contentious forms which were favoured. Artists were expected to lend unquestioning support to the state. On the other hand, when they have not merely sought to ignore the University dramatists, the bureaucrats have claimed that the intellectuals live in a dream-world and understand neither the practicalities of government nor what constitutes truly popular culture amongst the mass of the people.

By the mid-Seventies, drama was still a minor performance form, largely confined to the educated élite, although its practitioners aspired to make it popular, political, and educative. Traditional and adapted *ngomas* remained the most widely favoured art-form. Some schools promoted an interest in a widening range of performance techniques, while in urban areas the comic variety shows of the professional cultural troupes and the music of modern jazz bands attracted growing audiences, especially among the young. The state's major achievement in the cultural arena was that it had conditioned the people to accept art as something broadly nationalist which would naturally carry simple messages in praise of TANU's rule.

ETHIOPIA

*The end of an empire*³⁵

In 1973 the Conquering Lion of Judah, King of Kings, Elect of God, the Emperor of Ethiopia, His Imperial Majesty Haile Selassie I, attained his eightieth birthday. He now travelled less than had been his wont, and increasingly sat, like a small but immensely potent spider, in his palace, manipulating a web of power which spanned Ethiopia. When the Emperor did venture into public the populace fell to their knees and hid their faces from his blinding majesty. The palace gates were continually mobbed by a crowd that wished to petition the King of Kings for position, justice or clemency. Haile Selassie's authority was absolute and largely unquestioned. Yet, within a year, the monarchy which royal chroniclers claimed had lasted for three thousand years was to be swept away with hardly a murmur of complaint, and in its place a military council would reign supreme.

This revolution, surely one of the most extraordinary of the twentieth century, may be said to have begun when news of a terrible famine in the northern highlands first reached Addis Ababa in May 1973, as the result of the broadcasting of a film covertly made by Jonathan Dimpleby for the BBC. The famine had already been at crisis level for two years and is estimated to have cost some two hundred thousand lives.³⁶ Haile Selassie simply ignored his people's suffering, suppressed news of the tragedy, and continued to feed choice joints of beef to his pet lions. When the extent of the calamity became known, the court appears to have been surprised at the level of outrage expressed both by the international community and, more importantly, by students at the University. Fatalistic acceptance of their lot was what was expected of the people. The expression of a social conscience and demands for action by students represented thought-processes entirely alien to the ruling aristocracy. Popular outcry forced the Emperor to accept emergency aid (although he taxed deliveries of relief grain coming from abroad), and for a few months peace appeared to reign. However, in January 1974, soldiers in Neghelle, Sidamo, mutinied against appalling

³⁵ There have been numerous books written about the Ethiopian revolution. For an atmospheric description of the last days of the old Empire, Kapuscinski's *The Emperor* is essential reading. I have drawn extensively on Clapham's *Transformation and Continuity in Revolutionary Ethiopia*, on *Class and Revolution in Ethiopia* by Markakis & Nega Ayele (Nottingham: Spokesman, 1978), *The Ethiopian Revolution* by Fred Halliday & Maxine Molyneux (London: New Left Books, 1981), and Rene Lefort's *Ethiopia: An Heretical Revolution* (London: Zed, 1983).

³⁶ Severe famines have been recorded in Ethiopia regularly over many years. The aristocratic attitude to these recurring tragedies was summed up by one of Kapuscinski's interviewees: "Death from famine had existed in our Empire for hundreds of years, an everyday, natural thing, and it never occurred to anyone to make any noise about it" (*The Emperor*, 111).

living conditions and then arrested the officers sent to investigate their complaints. Unprecedented protests known as "Neghelle flu" began to spread across the country. Demonstrations against educational reforms were held in Addis Ababa in February by teachers and students, and by taxi drivers against increases in the price of petrol. Army units in Asmara and Addis Ababa mutinied in sympathy with the Sidamo protesters. Even the élite Air Force joined in the demands for better pay and conditions, and, increasingly, for political change.

What was truly extraordinary was that the Emperor did not respond with the crushing force which his people might have expected as a reward for their presumption. Instead, the absolute monarch sought to conciliate. The Prime Minister was replaced by a liberal, Endalkachew Makonnen (son of the playwright and former Prime Minister, Makonnen Endalkachew), who set about drawing up a new, moderate constitution for Ethiopia. It was a case of too little, too late. Haile Selassie had been aware of the potential threat posed by the armed forces ever since the Neway brothers' attempted coup, but he thought the danger came from the top and sought to appease the officer class with wage increases while ignoring the lower ranks. Fundamentally, the Emperor was bankrupt of new ideas for governing his empire. He was entirely unable to deal with demands, not for individual advancement, but for some degree of grass-roots democratisation.

The appointment of the new Prime Minister did little to stem a growing tide of revolt in the cities, and among the armed forces and intelligentsia. Continuing student protests were added to by trade-union demonstrations. Up until this point no theatre workers, except the ubiquitous Tsegaye Gebre-Medhin, had played any part in the course of the revolt. In 1973 Tsegaye had returned from pursuing *négritude* studies in Senegal to search for evidence of ancient cultures in northern Ethiopia. He had found his monuments. He had also witnessed the horror of mass famine. The poems Tsegaye wrote lamenting the Wollo tragedy were widely circulated, and even read on radio after news of the famine became public. Then, in early 1974, disaffected theatre workers joined the growing wave of protesters. They marched on parliament, demanding the removal of Captain Atnafu and his replacement at the Haile Selassie Theatre by Tsegaye. Once more the government's reaction was to conciliate. Tsegaye Gebre-Medhin was duly appointed director of the capital's most prestigious theatre, while Tesfaye Gessesse was given charge of the Ager Fikir.

Meanwhile, revolt was spreading. In April 1974, students in Jimma, the coffee capital of Ethiopia to the west of Addis Ababa, set up a "popular committee" to govern the town.³⁷ Then, on June 27, the Dergue officially met for the first time. *Dergue* simply means committee in Amharinya. The Dergue was a committee of one

³⁷ Coffee is Ethiopia's largest export, responsible for around fifty percent of foreign exchange earnings. Jimma is consequently a relatively prosperous and important town.

hundred and twenty-six soldiers, all under the rank of Lieutenant-Colonel, who emerged as the result of a secret, apparently democratic, election held amongst the lower ranks of the armed forces. With the help of some sympathetic senior officers, this group rapidly assumed a dominant role in directing events. It began to issue policy statements which were uncontested by either Emperor or parliament, and ordered the arrest of ever-increasing numbers of the aristocracy. In the following months the members of Haile Selassie's court were, one by one or in small groups, rounded up and taken into detention. The nobility appear to have been paralysed by their sovereign's failure to act in his or their interests, and simply waited for the soldiers to arrive to take them away. The King of Kings quietly signed every Dergue-written proclamation placed before him. Eventually Haile Selassie was left in his palace alone but for a single retainer, until on September 12, 1974, a blue Volkswagen "beetle" drew up before the imperial apartments. Despite his muted protests at this insulting means of transport the Emperor got into the back of the car and was driven off into obscurity. The Dergue assumed the name of the Provisional Military Administrative Council (PMAC) and formally took power.

The early revolutionary theatre

It was not clear in the early days of the revolution what political complexion the new régime would assume. The Air Force were known to favour some form of socialism, but they were an exceptionally cosmopolitan élite. Haile Selassie had so carefully kept all sources of political knowledge from the mass of his people that few can have known what they sought beyond the lifting of some of the weight of feudal autocracy. Here the intelligentsia, notably many playwrights and directors amongst them, believed they had a role to play in the revolutionary process.³⁸ But *azmari* actors and leading dramaturges welcomed the Dergue-led overthrow of the

³⁸ It is extremely difficult to find published sources on Ethiopian theatre in the post-revolution period, mostly because, before the fall of the Dergue, writers were afraid that anything they said which did not have a eulogistic tone and was not written in Marxist jargon (a) would be censored and (b) could lead to trouble for the author. These constraints applied to scholarship in many spheres, and severely restricted research projects in Ethiopia. My own "Ethiopia: The Creation of a Theatre Culture" is the only attempt to give an overall view of the drama in the revolutionary period (see ch. 5 and 6). I have been able to draw on Debebe Seifu's "A Note on Post-Revolution Ethiopian Theatre," in *9th International Conference of Ethiopian Studies* (Moscow, 1986) and Tesfaye Gessesse's "Ethiopian Literature Before and After the Revolution," in *Lotus: Afro-Asian Writing* (Cairo, 1978), as well as unpublished senior papers by Mamitu Yilma, Mengistu Mamo and Abebe Tadesse. Most of my information for this period, however, comes from interviews with a wide range of Ethiopian theatre practitioners, most notably perhaps Debebe Eshetu, Mengistu Lemma, Tesfaye Gessesse and Tsegaye Gebre-Medhin. Since rivalries between leading theatre personnel are intense, I often heard widely differing accounts of the same events. Accounts given in the body of this chapter are therefore my own deduction of the truth, based on a series of interviews.

monarchy. Even before Haile Selassie's deposition, plays were being performed which openly condemned the old régime. As early as February 1974, Tsegaye Gebre-Medhin declared his faith in the redeeming power of the armed forces when he wrote the revolution's first play.

Of all Ethiopia's senior dramatists, Tsegaye was the man who most wholeheartedly allied himself with the Dergue. *Ha Hu Ba Sidist Wore* (ABC in Six Months) was written in thirteen days following the events of the February uprisings, and as soon as Tsegaye was put in charge of the Haile Selassie Theatre this was the play he produced. The piece tells of a young teacher who, symbolically, is shown descending into madness as a result of a compound of social, emotional and financial problems. The existing order is revealed as unworkable, and the teacher ends up by calling for unspecified but radical change. Significantly, hope is seen to lie in the arrival of a relative who is a soldier, and who is expected to show the way back to sanity and order. This was the first of a quartet of revolutionary plays Tsegaye Gebre-Medhin was to write in the next three years in support of military policies. In Addis Ababa the new play was wildly popular. Audiences flocked to the theatre, and the play ran for an unprecedented six months.

It is, however, important to realise that Tsegaye was unique amongst Ethiopian dramaturges in the uncritical support he offered the military. Although all theatre staff and writers wanted change, and none apparently bemoaned the downfall of the Emperor, military policy was initially unclear. The overall tone and composition of any new government appeared, throughout 1974, to be open to both debate and influence. This was all the more true as the Dergue itself, although its meetings were secret, was known to be riven by factional disputes. As in Tanzania, the seizure of power had been the great objective. Once that goal was attained it became clear that the new government had little idea of just how to rule their conquest. Political knowledge had been so suppressed that the mass of the people could not, at least initially, be expected to assist in the formulation of overall policy. Indeed, the only response from the regions was a growing wave of ethnic secessionist movements which by 1977 would result in revolts in twelve of Ethiopia's fourteen provinces.

These revolts demonstrate the failure of the Dergue to win the hearts and minds of the majority of the people of Ethiopia. Nyerere in Tanzania always recognised that his rule depended on popular consent. But the members of the Dergue, after seizing power through conspiracy and force, followed the feudal example of the man they had deposed by continuing the rule of secrecy. Tanzanian intellectuals may argue that their country has been ruled through a "top-down" party approach, but for many years the mass of the peasantry appear to have believed that that same party gave them some voice at grass-roots level in the ordering of their affairs. When the PMAC did finally initiate a plan for a party in December 1985, the Provisional Office of Mass Organisational Affairs (POMOA) was set up as a vanguard,

not a mass grouping. In accordance with classical Marxist tenets, POMOA was to lead the people to Marxist–Leninist conformity, never to involve them in policy planning. At the same time, revolutionary Ethiopia initially lacked a clear leader. Whilst Nyerere came to power as benevolent teacher of his people, the Dergue assumed corporate leadership. Mengistu Haile–Mariam was not to emerge as undisputed leader-cum-dictator until after he had assassinated the nominal head of state, General Teferi Bante, in February 1977. The confusion over leadership led to an inward-looking Dergue, often apparently as concerned about internecine struggles as with the search for a political direction in which to lead Ethiopia.

What some members of the Dergue and the armed forces came to recognise was that they had to call on the superior political knowledge of certain members of the intelligentsia, particularly those at the University, who had so strongly supported the revolution. Christopher Clapham explains that the basis of such a link was already in place by 1974:

Many of the junior officers shared the students' disgust with what struck them as the unprogressive inadequacy of imperial government [...] Contacts between students and junior officers were closer than might be expected [...] Army officers in the capital frequently attended evening classes at the university, and were affected by the prevailing climate of ideas; quite a number of these officers, indeed, later held high office in the revolutionary regime.³⁹

The prevailing climate of ideas amongst the intelligentsia was left-wing. It was these intellectuals who pushed through, in the first year of the revolution, the programmes for radical land redistribution and nationalisation of property stocks which gave the Dergue what popular base it could claim. Clapham again:

Overwhelmingly the most important channel through which [...] policies were put onto the political agenda, at least in the early days, was through personal contacts between radical intellectuals and individual members of the Dergue. It was in this way that Dergue members became familiar with Marxist ideas [...] and started to consider the possibility of far deeper changes than any of their early pronouncements envisaged.⁴⁰

However, what the intelligentsia also called for, and what the Dergue initially appeared to consider, was a transfer to civilian power. In the expectation of at least some degree of power-sharing, six socialist parties emerged in Addis Ababa between 1974 and 1976.⁴¹ It was in this atmosphere of hope and change that a spate of political plays were presented.

³⁹ Clapham, *Transformation and Continuity*, 34.

⁴⁰ Clapham, *Transformation and Continuity*, 43.

⁴¹ The parties which emerged in this period were the EPRP (Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Party), Me'ison, ECHAT (Oppressed Peoples' Party of Ethiopia), Labour or Waz League, MALERED (Marxist–Leninist Organisation of Ethiopia) and Revolutionary Flame.

Here one must remember that political theatre in Ethiopia has generally meant drama exclusively, rather than the wider range of performance arts. Because the revolution was based on a coup, not on a popular revolt, no popular culture emerged spontaneously to celebrate the event. Because the Dergue worked in secrecy and through abrupt proclamations there was no overall policy for such a culture to explain. When the Dergue had consolidated its position it did promote and publicise revolutionary song and drama, but because the role of the masses was seen to be one of obedience rather than participation in change, there was no perceived need to spread revolutionary culture at the time of the coup. Moreover, the rural populace had minimal information about events in the capital, and until land reorganisation was implemented they probably had little interest. The revolution was initially an urban occurrence, the result of conflict between traditional and modern élites. The cultural tool most appropriate, therefore, to the revolution's explication and debate was the urban and élite cultural vehicle, the drama.

There was no shortage of playwrights waiting to take up the challenge of this new drama. Tsegaye Gebre-Medhin had shown that an audience existed for radical theatre, and the government appeared unable or unwilling to censor such work. At the Ager Fikir, Tesfaye Gessesse threw open his theatre to a succession of new plays celebrating the overthrow of the Emperor and debating the way forward. Several of the plays Tesfaye put on in this first year of the revolution had been written earlier, but they had been hidden away by their authors because their content was highly critical of imperial rule. Now, however, works like Mengistu Lemma's *Balekabara Baledaba* (The Mighty and the Lowly) and Abe Gubegna's *Yedakemoch Wotimed* (The Trap of the Weak), both of which examined corruption amongst the court and ministers and had as their heroes men who suffered for their exceptional probity, found willing audiences in Addis Ababa. Similarly, Tesfaye Gessesse's *Iqaw* (Iqaw), which examined the effects of state terrorism on an apparently innocent youth, had been written before the revolution but could only now expose the evils of Haile Selassie's secret policing system.

Interestingly, these new plays also contained experiments with form. Ethiopian playwrights have made nothing like the extensive efforts of certain Tanzanians to incorporate elements of folk-culture into their work. Instead, their models have been drawn from church literature and poetry, and church and court ritual with an admixture of ideas from the West. In *Balekabara Baledaba* we see some of the earliest use of the flashback technique in Ethiopian drama. *Ha Hu Ba Sidist Wore* turned to a far more episodic format than had been common in a drama which had previously aspired to a form of poetic naturalism. *Iqaw*, however, contained what were undoubtedly the most extreme experimental elements. *Iqaw* has a Kafkaesque absurdism in which we are transported to a world whose internal logic bears no relation to that of everyday life. The play also avoids tying itself to a specific time or location.

Although the timing of its writing makes it obvious that *Iqaw* was at least partly intended as a comment on Haile Selassie's methods of rule, the play contains allusions to both colonial and independent-African use of terrorism as a tool of government. The final play to be considered under Tsegaye's management of the Ager Fikir is Taddele Gebre-Hiwot's *Man Now Etiopiawe?* (Who is the Ethiopian?). This was a musical, which sought, not to criticise the past, but to explore what political system should be embraced by the new régime and how to develop a non-aligned Ethiopian form of democracy. All my informants have told me that the early revolutionary drama was immensely popular in Addis Ababa. The established tradition of vernacular drama in Ethiopia had resulted in a relatively sophisticated urban play-going public. Apparently, the military, intellectuals and the petit bourgeoisie all attended these plays. In the absence of free media, the drama became a focus for debate regarding the iniquities of the past and possibilities for the future.

Meanwhile, at the National Theatre, Tsegaye Gebre-Medhin continued his programme of producing his own plays in support of the Dergue. *Ha Hu Ba Sidist Wore* was followed by *Abugida Keyisso* (Learning to Read), which condemned bureaucratic corruption and, in a move reminiscent of some of the Tanzanian villagisation plays, exposed a group of reactionaries and saboteurs who were shown to be undermining the revolutionary Peasants' Association. He also wrote and produced in this period *Enat Alem* (Mother Courage). Only the central character was recognisably similar to Brecht's creation of the same name. The play itself was set just after the Italian occupation; it detailed atrocities carried out by both sides, and pointed out how Haile Selassie ignored the achievements of resistance fighters after he regained power.

Understandably, Tsegaye was the darling of the Dergue, and this fervour of admiration appears to have been reciprocated. During the period of the Emperor's overthrow, actors at the National Theatre had garlanded tanks drawn up before the Ministry of Defence, and Tsegaye himself paid for a statue of a soldier in commemoration of the revolution; it now stands in a garden adjoining the theatre and was unveiled by Mengistu Haile Mariam. Late in 1974 the playwright implemented an old dream when he donated a sum (somewhere between five thousand and fourteen thousand Birr, depending on whether one listens to Tsegaye or his detractors) from the profits of *Ha Hu Ba Sidist Wore* to set up an acting school at the National Theatre. The school offered a two-year practical drama course, and most of Addis Ababa's theatrical luminaries were persuaded to offer their services as teachers.

The thirty students who enrolled on the course were not the only new voices in Ethiopian drama. In the Sixties several young men had been inspired by liberal drama to seek professional training abroad. Abate Mekuria and Getachew Abdi each spent six years training, the former in England and Germany and the latter in Moscow. Haimanot Alemu trained in the United States, while Sahalu Assefa nurtured

his love of drama at Cairo University. All of these men experienced Tsegaye's patronage and, from early 1974, prospered as directors. Interestingly, of this group only Getachew Abdi had also attempted to work as a playwright. The trend had shifted towards employing directors who had received thorough foreign training, while playwrights and actors were domestic creations. However, as I have previously observed, most of the early revolutionary plays were written by already established playwrights. Abe Gubegna had started out as a writer of populist ephemera for the *Ager Fikir* in the Sixties. He later became better-known as a radical writer of novels and poetry but, although his best drama was probably written after the revolution, he had produced serious playscripts in both English and Amharinya before 1974.⁴² Only Taddele Gebre-Hiwot's was a new name in the first two years of the revolution, and I have not been able to find any information about his background.

Both Tesfaye and Tsegaye attracted far larger audiences to their theatres than had ever before attended the drama. No audience-figures are available, but all informants agree about the popularity and importance accorded to political drama in the first years of the revolution. Informants also testify to the sense of excitement at working in such a dynamic atmosphere. Ethiopian revolutionary drama played a role possibly more analogous to Russian revolutionary theatre than to the Tanzanian plays of celebration. Revolution created challenge and uncertainty and led to a drama united wholly only in its execration of the past. For the future, a host of different ideas could be entertained. The early popularity of the Dergue was due to its overthrow of the old régime. For audiences, actors and most playwrights the role of the PMAC in 1974–75 appeared conditional on the outcome of debate. Consequently, audiences were equally eager for Tsegaye's praise-dramas and the more questioning plays promoted at the *Ager Fikir*. By September 1975 it became apparent that the new government had reservations about such dramatic freedom; that was the month Tesfaye Gessesse was rounded up, along with around a thousand other citizens, to spend ninety days languishing in jail before being released without any charges being laid against him.

The PMAC and the theatre

Haile Selassie's censorship-system for the arts fell apart in early 1974. Without the Emperor to direct their efforts, the censors appear to have lost any sense of direction. Subsequently, no body existed with responsibility for control of artistic productions until the end of 1974, when an entirely new Ministry of Culture and Sport was set up. Even then, the theatres were not put under ministerial control until 1975.

⁴² Abe Gubegna's best known pre-revolutionary work was *Yepatris Lumumba Asezzan Amwamwat* (The Saddening Death of Patrice Lumumba; Addis Ababa: Berhanena Selam Press, 1961/62), an indictment of Western involvement in the death of the radical Zairean leader.

This vacuum of authority made possible the growth of a questioning political drama constrained only by the caution of individual playwrights and producers, still fearing the possibility of future retribution.

Before the revolution, responsibility for the promotion of the arts officially lay with the Ministry of Education and Fine Arts, but all my informants agree that the latter part of the title was honorific rather than indicative of any significant activity. Tsegaye Gebre-Medhin, for one, had been complaining about this situation since the late Fifties; in an interview with me, he claimed to have been largely responsible for the creation of the new ministry.⁴³ This seems to be highly likely, given the playwright's long-term concern for the development of Ethiopian drama and his favoured position with the PMAC in 1974. The new Ministry was the smallest of all those set up by the revolutionary government, and from the beginning the lion's share of its resources were allocated to sport rather than culture. The Ministry's cultural duties appear initially to have been nebulous in the extreme. Since Ethiopian bureaucrats have never been encouraged to show initiative but are, rather, trained to follow a political lead, whether imperial or revolutionary, officials throughout 1975 avoided the issue of the control of theatres while they waited for the Dergue to find time to consider the role of the arts in revolutionary Ethiopia.⁴⁴

The action against Tesfaye Gessesse is the first indication we have that the PMAC began to see drama as a possible threat to its programmes rather than as a support. It is also one of the first indications of a hardening of the line the government was taking towards civilian interference. The Dergue's honeymoon period actually lasted less than a year. By May 1975 demonstrators had taken to the streets of Addis Ababa demanding civilian participation in government, and the early slogan of "Change Without Bloodshed" became a mockery when soldiers shot into a peaceful crowd of protesters. By August an official opposition group, the Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Party (EPRP), had emerged as the first recognised opposition party, and it became evident that a struggle for power was unlikely to be avoided in the city. It was against this background of growing dissent that the first mass arrests were carried out. Just who ordered Tesfaye Gessesse's detention is unknown, but there were several reasons why a senior

⁴³ Interviews with Tsegaye Gebre-Medhin, Addis Ababa, 1987–1989.

⁴⁴ Even Peter Schwab, one of the least critical commentators on the Ethiopian revolution, complains of bureaucratic inefficiencies due to political fear:

Since almost all power and authority rests with the Dergue and COPWE [successor to POMOA], the ministries of government responsible for the day-to-day running of Ethiopia have very limited authority. As a result individuals in these ministries, who are not working members of COPWE or the Dergue, try to avoid as much as possible making any decisions [...] The inefficiency and lethargy that results is not so very different from that which existed under Haile Selassie's government (*Ethiopia: Politics, Economics and Society* [London: Pinter, 1985: 51]).

official might want him removed from power. Not only did Tesfaye promote non-doctrinaire drama, he also showed a disturbing independence in the manner in which he ran his theatre. Tesfaye had undertaken extensive renovations to the Ager Fikir without consulting the government. The plays he directed were politically open-ended and, possibly most damning, his *Iqaw* might be taken to be critical of the Dergue as well as of the Emperor.

Culture, however, was still a relatively minor concern in the reorganisation of the Ethiopian empire. With Tesfaye removed, the trusted Tsegaye was given a free hand to push through the appointment of his protégés, Sahalu Assefa and Getachew Abdi, to run the Ager Fikir, and to organise the National Theatre as he saw fit. What neither the government nor Tsegaye took into account was that, in the dynamic political atmosphere sweeping Addis Ababa, ordinary workers were beginning to protest against exploitation. In the theatres the workers were already a fairly politicised group. For some fifteen years actors had been performing in plays critical of the establishment. They were known to have close contacts with the trade-union movement, and there is evidence that some theatre personnel were connected with the EPRP. Yet material conditions for actors and backstage staff had scarcely improved since the Fifties. Workers were paid a pittance. They had no job-security and no voice in the running of the theatres they served. Although they placed no conditions on the appointment of Tsegaye Gebre-Medhin as director of the National, staff obviously expected that the radical playwright would introduce some measure of reform in running the theatre. This he signally failed to do. Management remained in the hands of a small group, and there were many accusations of favouritism among actors. Above all, huge disparities in income went uncorrected. Whereas leading actors earned barely enough to survive on, Tsegaye continued, without compunction, to pocket forty percent of box-office receipts as his playwright's share. To be fair, so did all other writers and directors. However, Tsegaye was in a uniquely powerful position, and he in particular had set himself up as a radical and revolutionary at the same time that he was privately amassing a fortune.

This dichotomy between public radicalism and private conservatism was to some degree characteristic of all the leading playwrights and directors. The mutually perceived fundamental gulf between the position of the upper-class élite and that of the masses is shown in microcosm in the divide between *azmari* performers and the producers of drama. Thousands of aristocrats might be deprived of power, but the new leaders of Ethiopia continued to rule in autocratic fashion. However, in the mid-Seventies Addis Ababa was in a state of flux. Ideas of a more democratic ordering of society were beginning to permeate the working class, and the new government was by no means sure of its power. In April 1976, Tsegaye Gebre-Medhin was to become a target of workers' desire for democracy.

The second National Theatre revolt was carefully planned. The performers' demonstration was timed for the day after the proclamation of the Programme of the National Revolution. Over a hundred theatre staff marched peacefully through the centre of Addis Ababa in pursuit of their demands for better guaranteed wages, job-security, pensions and the right to form a union. They also called for the removal of their erstwhile hero, Tsegaye Gebre-Medhin. "Tsegaye is a bourgeois at heart," they chanted, and "Down with Tsegaye Gebre-Medhin." As they passed the Ager Fikir, staff from that theatre joined the demonstration, which then headed for the palace from which the Dergue was operating. At the Arat Kilo roundabout a few hundred metres from the palace, soldiers were waiting. They were not amenable to discussion. Guns were fired; a musician from the Ager Fikir was killed. Eighty of the protesters were rounded up while the rest fled for safety. Later that day, more troops called on Tsegaye Gebre-Medhin, and he too was taken into custody.

The theatre workers' action appears to have taken the PMAC by surprise. Although the first reaction was to suppress revolt, most detainees were released within a few days. Tsegaye was held for three weeks, and ten protesters were kept in prison for six months. All were finally released without any charges being laid against them and without suffering more than verbal interrogation. Most importantly, the workers won nearly all of their demands. Theatre staff became civil servants, with pension rights and job-security. Wages were not raised, but they were guaranteed. Performers were given permission to form a union. Tsegaye Gebre-Medhin was removed from his directorship, and in his place Tesfaye Gessesse was appointed to run the National Theatre.

Ambivalence and uncertainty characterise the Dergue's actions in this matter. In principle they acknowledged the workers' right to demand change, even to the extent of putting a man they had recently disgraced in the most prestigious position in Ethiopian theatre; but they altered none of the structures in the organisation of theatre and made no move to equalise the standing of actor and director. Nor did they abandon Tsegaye. After three weeks in detention, the man at the centre of the protest was moved to a senior position at the Ministry of Culture, where he remained until his retirement in 1993.⁴⁵

Changing relations with government

It is difficult to assess the Dergue's popularity in Ethiopia as a whole at any one time. Undoubtedly, Addis Ababa and the armed forces at first welcomed the military government. When news spread to the regions, there appear to have been two

⁴⁵ Tsegaye Gebre-Medhin has held senior positions at the Ministry of Culture as both Permanent Secretary and Advisor. Rumour has it that when he was removed from the National Theatre he sought to become Deputy Minister, but he was never given this position.

broad reactions. Strong unassimilated ethnic groups took their chance to try to secede from the Empire. However, as the reform programme was explained to them, and as land redistribution policies came into effect, Amhara peasants and other peoples with a weaker sense of national identity came to see the new rulers as liberators.⁴⁶ This is a simplification of an extremely complex situation, but it provides a basis on which to discuss the role of culture in the latter part of the decade.

In Addis Ababa the great cause for discontent two years after the military take-over was that it had become clear that the Dergue was moving away from any idea of power-sharing with civilians. The two strongest civilian political groupings were the EPRP and Me'ison. The EPRP was led by intellectuals, both home-grown and foreign-trained, and refused to compromise with the PMAC, while Me'ison took a more conciliatory line. As a result, from mid-1976 the PMAC entered into a temporary alliance with Me'ison which further alienated the opposition. In September 1976 the EPRP began a campaign of urban terrorism directed at Me'ison cadres. As this campaign escalated, the PMAC retaliated by arming civil-defence groups, and in mid-1977 proclaimed the "Red Terror." The capital was effectively in a state of civil war. Throughout the latter part of 1977 and early 1978, Me'ison and the EPRP fought each other to a standstill. They killed thousands of each others' supporters, and ended up by leaving the Dergue in the very position of supremacy they had sought to avoid.

At the same time secessionist movements, particularly the Somali irridentist uprising in the Ogaden and the Eritrean liberation war in the north, threatened to tear the Ethiopian empire into shreds. Appeals to Amhara nationalism were insufficient to secure victory after the United States withdrew support for Ethiopia in early 1977.⁴⁷ Only the timely switch of Russian allegiance from the Somalis to the Ethiopians saved the revolutionary government, so that by the end of 1978 the PMAC had established itself as a hard-line Marxist-Leninist régime in effective control of all but the far north of Eritrea.

Throughout this period the outcome of the struggle for supremacy was far from obvious to observers, and although the Dergue increasingly imposed Marxist political conformity its control was by no means absolute. Moreover, the initial reform programme had built up a considerable store of goodwill towards the military gov-

⁴⁶ The policies of the Dergue reached the countryside largely via the students who, in 1975, were sent out to the regions on a year-long "*zemacha*" (campaign) to explain the revolution to the peasantry. This strategy had the benefit of removing a volatile and articulate section of the community from the cities at the time when the military were seeking to consolidate their power over civilians.

⁴⁷ The United States had been a major aid donor to Ethiopia under imperial rule, in return for permission to run a massive strategic military base in Eritrea. They continued to supply arms to the revolutionary regime until they were expelled in 1977.

ernment which, outside the areas that wished to secede, would take a long time to evaporate totally. Finally, in the Amhara heartlands there was and is considerable nationalist and imperialist feeling. The secessionist wars actually strengthened support for the military government in Ethiopia's central regions.⁴⁸

Against this background of civil war and turmoil, two theatre movements need to be taken into account in the second half of the Seventies: the expansion of urban professional theatre, and the agit-prop theatre movement. Both reflect a growing tendency on the part of the Dergue to seek to direct cultural expression.

In 1976 two new theatres opened in Addis Ababa. The municipality had lost control of the Haile Selassie/National Theatre some years before. When they built a grand new municipal complex, a theatre was incorporated into the plans. Teferi Bezwayhu, a young director who trained in the USSR and had since become popular with actors through his work at the YMCA club, was influential in organising the new acting company, and recruiting twenty-six *kinet* performers to train as actors. The University Arts Centre's *kinet* group was employed as a music/dance ensemble, and cinema equipment was also installed. However, Teferi Bezwayhu never worked as director of the theatre he planned. Some informants claim he was too concerned with aesthetics for the commercial tastes of the council, while others have told me that Tsegaye Gebre-Medhin intervened to win the appointment for his protégé, Abate Mekuria.

The establishment of the Ras Theatre, a little later in the same year, was the outcome of the Dergue's desire to reward one of their leading supporters, Wondossen Gebre-Yesus, who was an actor and became the new theatre's first general manager. The Ras is different from other theatres in Addis Ababa, all of which are in the more attractive centre of town. The Ras, converted from the nationalised Cinema Ras Hailu, is in the Mercato, Addis Ababa's huge market area, which is also home to many of the poorest of the poor, not to mention a large criminal element. Conversion of the Ras was minimal, and the theatre remained a poor relation, with a tin roof, hessian-sacking lined walls and a clientèle even more prone than most to making vociferous comments and scattering food-remains liberally on the cracked concrete floor. The new theatre, like all the others, also continued to work as a cinema. The acting company were all graduates of the National Theatre training course, while the *kinet* group was selected and trained by a leading impresario, Tesfaye Lemma.

The appointments of Abate Mekuria and Wondossen Gebre-Yesus were presumably intended to ensure a pro-Dergue programme of plays. However, Wondossen died on stage not long after he took charge of his present. The liberal influence of Tsefaye Gessesse at the National undermined the government's wishes for a drama of

⁴⁸ Amhara nationalism remained a strong force and a vital factor in the escalating civil war of the late Eighties, as, in spite of disillusion with Mengistu Haile-Mariam, the Amharas had no desire to let a liberation force led by another ethnic group take control of the country.

political conformity, and politics were still sufficiently volatile in the capital to ensure that drama remained dynamic in all the city's four theatres. In contrast, the amateur agit-prop theatre movement was far more a government tool. Informants have told me that agit-prop was pioneered by the EPRP, whose more sophisticated members may well have learnt about how such theatre was implemented in the Russian revolution and later by workers' groups in Western Europe. The first plays concentrated on urban, proletarian issues, urging workers to become unionised. When the EPRP was crushed the Dergue turned their cultural weapon against its progenitors. Suspected sympathisers of the EPRP were rounded up and sent as prisoners to centres for re-education in correct ideology. Apparently one proof of conversion was for reformed prisoners to take part in pro-government dramas.

As with all Ethiopian drama, agit-prop theatre came from the capital. However, as the plays were often short and improvised around a simple theme, the form did not demand literacy or daunting professional skills of its performers. Consequently, agit-prop spread widely among amateur groups across the country. Groups were often attached to *kinet* troupes, which were seen as traditional and therefore easily accepted by the conservative peasantry. My own observations indicate that there was a ripple-effect in carrying this drama to rural areas. When I first went to Ethiopia in 1984 agit-prop was seen in the capital as dull Dergue indoctrination, but in the regions the form was fresher and still regarded as innovative, arousing considerable enthusiasm amongst youth groups and Peasants' Associations. In this context, it is interesting that the rapid spread of basic education after the revolution appears to have moderated the attitude of scorn previously poured on performers. To be a musician or actor may still be seen as odd, but is less scandalous than it was previously, and amateur arts are now encouraged by all official youth organisations. Unfortunately, as is the case in all the cultures I am examining, such tolerance has been slower to extend to women than to men. Amateur groups attract few female performers, as women are afraid to face family or social condemnation as a result of appearing on stage.

It would be a mistake to think that most agit-prop drama, whether amateur or professional – for the early years of the revolution also saw agit-prop in the professional theatres – was imposed. Debebe Seifu claims such drama was widely popular with unsophisticated audiences crying out for information about the revolution.⁴⁹ The Dergue and its policies could still claim wide support, and the plays often appealed to a very basic patriotism, as evidenced by such titles as *Our Struggle* and *Struggle for Victory*. Informants have told me that the agit-prop movement reached a climax with the celebration of *Yenat Agir Tiri* (Call of the Motherland) in 1976, which included many patriotic agit-prop dramas in its efforts to raise money for the huge war-effort.

⁴⁹ See Debebe Eshetu, *A Note on Post-Revolution Ethiopian Theatre*.

The campaign also built a base for a rural amateur arts programme to be carried out in the Eighties.

Plays in the professional theatres, 1976–1979

In the capital the pro-government plays of Tsegaye Gebre-Medhin were now being supplemented by the work of new young playwrights. Many such plays had extremely simplistic structures, reminiscent of the earlier morality plays of the Thirties, Forties and Fifties; only, now Marxist principles replaced those of Christianity. Abebe Tadesse's analysis of this drama identifies four main themes: the victory of the masses over the old regime; satiric comment on the imperialists; optimistic discussion of the cause of the revolution; and patriotic description of the wars against the Somalis and Eritreans.⁵⁰ In view of what I have said earlier about the increasing sophistication of urban drama, it may seem surprising that such overt propaganda could win large audiences. One has to consider, however, that after the revolution the audience-base rapidly expanded. The Dergue organised special performances for workers' and forces' groups, and these plays also toured the regions, where audiences were generally less sophisticated than the core-group of city playgoers. Moreover, it is important not to underestimate the drawing-power of a drama which was discussing current events in an open manner not available to any other cultural form, and which had been unimaginable under Haile Selassie's régime.

Although Tsegaye Gebre-Medhin's work is too complex to be characterised as agit-prop, the third and fourth plays in his revolutionary quartet also gave unequivocal support to the Dergue. He might no longer have a theatre, but his protégé, Abate Mekuria, was running the City Hall Theatre and Tsegaye's plays were still immensely popular with audiences, commanding regular full houses in theatres seating over a thousand people. *Abugida Keyisso* was performed at the City Hall Theatre and was followed by *Melikte Yohannes* and *Mekdim* – titles which refer to stages in the traditional process of learning. The latter two plays dealt with the wars with Somalia and Eritrea respectively, and showed Ethiopian troops in a heroic light, triumphing over saboteurs, imprisonment and torture.

Two other more sophisticated pro-Dergue plays both dealt with the evils of opportunists who tried to use the revolution for their own purposes. The plays were potentially controversial, in that they dared to poke fun at revolutionary politicians. Abe Gubegna's comic treatment of this theme in *Poletikanna Poletignoch* (Politics and Politicians) was immensely popular at the Ager Fikir and ran for over six months, while Negash Gebre-Mariam's *Yedil Atibia Arbeigna* (The Opportunist Patriots) was similarly successful at the National Theatre.

⁵⁰ See Abebe Tadesse, "Bertolt Brecht and Contemporary Ethiopian Theatre," senior paper, Theatre Arts Department, Addis Ababa University, 1982.

The final pro-Dergue producer I want to mention here is Haimanot Alemu. Haimanot, who directed *Poletikanna Poleignoch*, co-wrote and produced several celebratory dance/mime pieces in the late Seventies, mostly at the National Theatre. *Becommunistoch And Enat* (By the Unity of the Communists), *Guzwachin* (Our Journey), *Tiglachin* (Our Struggle) and *Addis Abebe* (The Maskal Flower) all had simple revolutionary messages, but they represented a radical departure from the normal Ethiopian declamatory style. Haimanot Alemu's taste for experimentation even prompted him to undertake the previously unthinkable project for a senior Ethiopian dramaturge of co-directing a cooperatively written play, *Damachin* (Our Blood). Regrettably, my information on this innovative man is limited, as he defected to America in the early Eighties.

After the overthrow of the Tsegaye dictatorship, Tesfaye Gessesse's was undoubtedly the most influential voice in Ethiopian theatre. Tesfaye is a self-professed liberal and, unlike most of the senior members of the Ethiopian theatre establishment, tends to avoid a hard-line stand on particular issues and the acrimonious rivalries so endemic to the profession. Under Tesfaye's direction the National Theatre became home to a varied diet of drama, written and directed by a wide range of personnel. At the Ager Fikir, Sahalu Assefa had now turned against his former mentor, Tsegaye, and followed Tesfaye's lead. The liberal policies practised at the two senior theatres influenced the selection of drama put on in 1976-79 at the City Hall and the Ras. What the theatres had in common was that nearly all their work was broadly political, and that the vast majority of productions were premieres. Between 1974 and 1980 the four theatres put on over fifty new plays.

Although much of the new work was pro-Dergue and stylistically simple, all of the theatres hosted more complex and controversial plays. In 1976, Mengistu Lemma's most recent work, *Tayaki*, an adaptation of J.B. Priestley's *An Inspector Calls*, was put on at both the National and Ras theatres. Mengistu was never a man to embrace new causes rashly; nor was he quick to praise Dergue rule as a new utopia. However, since Mengistu ranked second only to Tsegaye in the Ethiopian dramatists' league of fame, the Dergue wished to have him on their side. *Tayaki* was a play Mengistu had been ordered to write. His first script was adapted to the Ethiopian situation but closely resembled Priestley's play, and the Dergue decided it was not sufficiently revolutionary. In typically Mengistu style, compromising and protesting simultaneously, the playwright provided a new ending. Soldiers now marched on stage and arrested the whole bourgeois family at the centre of the play, with the lone exception of the rebellious daughter. But the whole sequence was carried out in silence. Debebe Eshetu told me that such dumb insolence was not viewed with favour by the government, and that it was after *Tayaki* that compulsory censorship of all new playscripts was reintroduced.

Mengistu's next play was also controversial. A version of *Tsere Kolonialist* (Anti-Colonialist) had been written as early as 1973, but since the play looked at the Italian occupation in a manner which failed to portray all Ethiopians as pure and heroic it was not suitable for production at that time.⁵¹ Besides, Haile Selassie was known to have ambivalent feelings towards members of the resistance who fought for the homeland while he was in safe refuge in the genteel British spa town of Bath, and he might not have cared for a play which glorified the guerrilla fighters. *Tsere Kolonialist* views the Italian occupation through the eyes of a kaleidoscope of characters, ranging from a mystical old priest to a group of young children, and is based on Mengistu's own recollections of the period. In the play, the Ethiopians outwit their pompous Italian overlords by playing on the vanity and superstition of the conquerors, but at the same time our heroes are extremely concerned about their own material well-being. The leading characters are all earthy tricksters, although the mysterious protagonist, Kassa, is shown to combine the characteristics of trickster and tragic hero when he is finally captured and revealed as a resistance leader. Tesfaye Gessesse chose to direct *Tsere Kolonialist* at the National in 1978, but the play immediately ran into trouble. By now the PMAC was taking a firmly Marxist-Leninist line, and this included a preference for serious, straightforwardly realist drama. Mengistu's play contained several visionary sequences and a liberal spicing of comedy, and made no references to future revolutionary glories. In order to placate the régime, Mengistu did put the play on under a political-sounding title instead of his preferred *Kassa*, and changed the priest-figure, based on his own father, into a secular visionary. However, the régime had little trust in Mengistu. The playwright was of the opinion that there was suspicion of any work which dealt with the subject of fascism. He also told me that Tesfaye's interpretation of the play wrongly glorified the corrupt magician-figure of Waheeb. The censors initially approved the script, but then changed their minds just before the opening performance. Only when Mengistu made a personal appeal to his old acquaintance, the Prime Minister, Fikere Selassie, was the play allowed to go on, but performances were restricted from twice a week as planned to once a week.

The other major controversial play of this period was Tesfaye Gessesse's *Tehaddiso* (Renaissance), directed by Debebe Eshetu for the fifth anniversary celebrations of the revolution. The play adopts a Brechtian, episodic mode of performance, and in sixteen scenes looks at a variety of urban and rural reactions to revolution. The work climaxes in a scene which reflects a well-known PMAC technique for discovering supposed "counter-revolutionaries" who were, in fact, actors planted amongst the audience. Unfortunately the break with proscenium-arch conventions was un-

⁵¹ Most of my information on the circumstances of original performances of *Tayaki* and *Tsere Kolonialist* comes from an interview with Mengistu Lemma in Addis Ababa in November 1987.

familiar to Ethiopia. In several cases, particularly when the play went on tour in the regions, audience members thought there was an actual raid taking place, and denounced themselves. Tesfaye was criticised by many who said that his play was irresponsible, given the political climate of the time, while the PMAC were irritated by his depiction of their terrorist methods of government.

What is notable about the drama of the late Seventies is that it was the young playwrights who produced the straightforward agit-prop or socialist-realist plays preferred by the Dergue, whereas older playwrights were generally responsible for both the more politically controversial and the stylistically experimental work. There were several factors underlying this unusual pattern. First, many of the more rebellious and highly educated youths who might have been expected to produce a new generation of challenging dramatists had been linked with the EPRP. The Red Terror resulted in their death, imprisonment or intimidation. It left a whole generation of urban youth profoundly unwilling to challenge military rule and vulnerable to self-censorship. Second, one must recall the growing influence of Soviet principles of drama – several young directors returned from training in the USSR and applied ideas of socialist realism acquired there. Such directors and playwrights were receptive to the belief that the prime function of revolutionary drama was to provide educational support for the new régime. In contrast, the older generation of dramaturges were influenced not only by political considerations, but also by the poetic and ritual elements of their early traditional education, and by ideas of the importance of aesthetic considerations, often acquired in the West. Whether or not they were supporters of the Dergue, they were also concerned with stylistic experimentation and with the individual aesthetic excellence of their work. Finally, the revolutionary government could hardly regard men like Tsegaye Gebre-Medhin, Mengistu Lemma and Tesfaye Gessesse as an easy pushover. One of the clearest indicators of the importance accorded to drama, at least in urban Ethiopia, is the measure of quiet fame attached to these men. They had access, not only to the most senior political figures, but also to widespread public support. Among the many thousand deaths and long-term imprisonments of those who have displeased the Dergue, the only victim who was a professional performer was the Ager Fikir musician shot in the revolt against Tsegaye, whereas theatre personnel who have supported the PMAC have been highly honoured. In spite of the anxiety which independent-minded theatre practitioners obviously caused the government at times, it would appear that the overall support of the theatres was seen as too important to be imperilled unless performers were openly insurgent, and that open challenges to leading playwrights were viewed as risky. Consequently, men like Mengistu and Tesfaye could present critical drama even as the Dergue tightened its control over Ethiopia, whereas a novice playwright would have instantly fallen victim to the censor.

By 1980 Dergue control was such that one can hardly speak any longer of drama which spontaneously supported the government. All new work had to be subjected to ideological censorship, although it was not until 1983 that the final loophole was plugged and the Ministry of Culture took from the theatres the right to choose which plays were performed at a given venue. This is not to say that dramatists and performers had all turned away from the revolutionary government, but the euphoria attached to dynamic political drama which reflected the people's wishes and encouraged revolutionary debate had dissipated. If one has to choose a single event which marked an end-point to the period of consenting political drama it must, I think, be the sacking of Tesfaye Gessesse from the National Theatre in 1979.

Tesfaye had taken a lead at the National in promoting both new playwrights and plays with a range of political views, and his prestige undoubtedly encouraged others to follow a similar programme. This was reason enough for an increasingly doctrinaire government to look for ways to get rid of him, but the final straw was when Tesfaye unilaterally raised actors' wages. Now that they had job-security, poverty was the actors' greatest complaint. As civil servants, actors were dependent for their wage-level on educational attainments, and for most performers these were minimal. The Ethiopian Actors' Union proved to be useless in fighting for improved conditions because it was entirely subject to the government-run AETU (All Ethiopian Trade Union). A situation thus persisted where performers of many years' experience and widespread fame were earning less than 100 Birr (approximately £25) a month. Many of these people were long-standing friends and co-workers of Tesfaye; eventually he decided that the situation was untenable. A committee was set up within the National Theatre, and it was decided that all wages should be reviewed upwards. A minimum salary was set at 185 Birr per month, rising to 500 Birr for an actor with twenty years' service. The Dergue and the Ministry of Culture were understandably enraged at such blatant flouting of their policies. Yet, as was the case with the earlier theatre revolts, performers' demands were finally accepted, and the wage rises spread to all urban theatres. This was the final victory in the battle for performers' rights. However, it provided the excuse the Dergue wanted to get rid of Tesfaye. He was moved to the nebulous position of "advisor" to Ethiopian television; shortly afterwards Sahalu Assefa also lost his job, so that the way was left open for the government to appoint uncritical supporters of their régime to manage all the professional theatres.

The increasing control exercised by the government over the theatres reflects the growing confidence and hard-line attitudes of the Dergue in all areas. However, it is important to note the difference between control in the regions and in the capital. Outside Addis Ababa, drama was seen as a revolutionary innovation and was therefore uncontested as a pro-government art-form, much as was the case in Tanzania outside Dar es Salaam University. In contrast, drama in Addis Ababa had an estab-

lished role as a questioning art-form, and restrictions had to be imposed with far more circumspection.

The state had overseen a massive expansion of drama, and indeed a similar growth of organised *kinet* and music troupes, and for some years politics and art had been broadly in sympathy with each other in the Amhara heartlands (all drama was performed in Amharinya). However, the refusal to share power meant that tension mounted between the military and civilians, and as a consequence we see increasingly that artistic support for the régime was imposed rather than freely given. After 1979 many leading dramatists and directors were to make silent protest against this situation, either by ceasing to work or by turning to non-political subjects and foreign translations for their material.

ZIMBABWE

*The question of nation-building*⁵²

Independence found Zimbabwe a divided nation. The black majority were victorious, but they were split into factions between the ZANU (PF)-supporting Shona and ZAPU loyalists concentrated among the Ndebele.⁵³ Robert Mugabe recognised that he could not hope to lead his country to prosperity without the cooperation of the Ndebele, who formed a solid minority block in southern Zimbabwe, and the whites, who retained control of most commercial agriculture and large-scale business. Even among the Shona there were profound divisions between highly politicised ex-combatants, rural peasantry and city-dwellers.

Unity and reconciliation were the themes of Mugabe's government. Such a stance was essential if one of the potentially richest nations in Africa was to regain its strength after years of civil war. Moderation was also imposed by the conditions of the Lancaster House agreement, which reserved twenty parliamentary seats for whites for a period of ten years and guaranteed the security of white-owned assets. At the same time, ZANU (PF) policy was committed to working towards a Marxist state, and towards fulfilling the major promises to the black majority of education

⁵² My main published sources on post-independence Zimbabwean politics have been the local newspapers, the *Herald* and *Sunday Mail* in Harare, and the *Bulawayo Chronicle*, plus Stoneman's *Zimbabwe's Inheritance*, Canaan Banana's *Turmoil and Tenacity*, and *Zimbabwe: The Political Economy of Transition 1980-1986*, ed Ibbo Mandaza (CODESRIA). I have also called on my experiences and conversations with a wide variety of Zimbabweans during visits to the country in 1985, 1989, 1990 and 1992.

⁵³ ZANU (PF) – Patriotic Front – was the name taken officially for the independence elections of 1980.

for all and the re-distribution of land. Such aims were inherently contradictory and were bound to cause problems for the government in the future. Free education up to the end of secondary school had to be abandoned because of the prohibitive costs involved, while land re-distribution could proceed only slowly, as it involved full compensation to white farmers. Moreover, to ensure the retention of the confidence of the huge multinationals which control so much of Zimbabwe's wealth, movement in a left-wing direction could only be gradual.⁵⁴ In large part, the government continued to preside over a capitalist state, while teaching Marxism in the schools and speaking in terms of one day achieving communism.

In Matabeleland a significant minority of distrustful and disappointed ZAPU fighters failed to give up their weapons. Sporadic warfare continued in the region until the ZAPU and ZANU (PF) leaderships finally managed to reach a Unity Accord in December 1983.⁵⁵ This was a major achievement for Mugabe, as was the stemming of the outward flow of whites and their wealth. However, the three ethnic groups remained suspicious of each other.

None of this is to deny that mass feeling in the early Eighties was of elation at finally winning the liberation war. There was great hope among the black population, and among white liberals, that the sweeping aside of racist legislation, and the new land and education policies, heralded an equitable and prosperous era.⁵⁶ Yet popular culture in Zimbabwe quickly took on a questioning attitude towards government. Theatre became much more rapidly a medium for critically analysing government than it had in Tanzania or Ethiopia. This was partly because of the contradictory nature of a government which mixed Marxist rhetoric with largely capitalist policies. Moreover, the post-independence black theatre movement grew from schools for ex-combatants and from a body of foreign theatre practitioners whose own experiences made them wary of utopian dreams. As I demonstrated in the previous chapter, young guerrillas were highly politicised, and were used to independent expression of their wishes, even when these clashed with those of the authorities. The political sophistication of this group, and of the expatriate left-wing dramaturges, meant that Mugabe had to contend with informed, aggressive questioning of his government's actions by artists at a far earlier stage than was the case in either of the other two countries analysed.



⁵⁴ Four major multi-national companies, Delta, T.A. Holdings, Anglo-American and Lonrho, between them own enormous stakes in Zimbabwe's economy.

⁵⁵ For detailed information on the protracted business of reaching the Unity Accord, see *Turmoil and Tenacity*, ch. 13.

⁵⁶ Such feelings are impossible to quantify, but there was a spirit of optimism prevailing on my first visit to Zimbabwe in 1985 which had disappeared by the time of my return in 1989.

*Towards a new culture*⁵⁷

The range of cultural backgrounds operating in Zimbabwe at the time of independence meant that new initiatives in the arts could not happen simultaneously across the board. The white theatre-establishment inherited by Mugabe's government was obviously unacceptable in an independent Zimbabwe, but development in the arts has been uneven, a problem exacerbated by the government's uncertainty as to how to try and direct artistic development. In 1980 the only national organ for official support of the arts was the National Arts Foundation, which was granted minimal funding and mainly supported white amateur endeavour. The National Theatre Organisation of that time has been described by Susan Hains, its present director, as a "disgustingly racist organisation,"⁵⁸ and provision for encouraging black artistic expression was minimal.

The government response to this situation was to institute a Division of Culture under the Ministry of Education in order to plan a cultural policy relevant to all of Zimbabwe. However, one cannot create a national culture by diktat, and in 1980 Zimbabwe had an acute shortage of dramatists, directors and performers with the skills required for producing community-oriented arts. The first steps towards building national culture in the performing arts were therefore tentative.

Traditional culture was something the government wished to cherish and could easily target. In 1980 the Zimbabwe National Traditional Dance Association was set up and encouraged to hold competitions and festivals throughout the country. This was followed in 1981 by the establishment of a National Dance Company. As in the other countries I am examining, there have been frequent accusations that traditional dance is used by the authorities for the purposes of "airport culture" and is often divorced from its original context, functioning only as a spectacle in contemporary society. This issue is especially problematical in Zimbabwe, where deculturisation means that many people do not know their traditional dances and music. In such cases dance amateurs have to be particularly sensitive if they are not to be accused

⁵⁷ Several papers have been important to my analysis of post-independence Zimbabwean theatre. The *Zimbabwean Theatre Report 1* (Harare, 1988) was a mine of useful information. Also useful were Kaarsholm's "Mental Colonization or Catharsis? Theatre, Democracy and Cultural Struggle from Rhodesia to Zimbabwe," Zinyemba's *Zimbabwean Drama*, articles by Stephen Chifunye, Evie Globerman and Robert McLaren in *Journal of Southern African Studies* 16.2 (Oxford, June 1990), and Ngugi wa Miri's articles on "Some of the Ways Towards a People's Theatre" 50-51 in *Moto* (Gweru, December 1989 & January 1990). However, the published material on modern Zimbabwe is not extensive, and I have drawn heavily on interviews with such theatre practitioners as Stephen Chifunye, Kimani Gecau, Robert McLaren, Nicola Davies, Susan Hains and Cont Mhlana. For a full list of interviewees, see Annex A.

⁵⁸ Susan Hains, speaking at the "Women in Theatre Workshop" at the University of Zimbabwe, January 1990.

of imposing an archaic culture on their people, and the use of traditional dance in modern society needs to be carefully analysed. The government hired trained, though foreign, choreographers of African dance to lead the new company, which was intended to stimulate regional copies – although this never happened. In 1981 the National Dance Company put on a dance-drama for the first anniversary of independence called *Mbuya Nehanda: The Spirit of Chimurenga*.⁵⁹ This celebratory production combined indigenous, revolutionary, and modern music and dance. In the same spirit, in 1982, Basil Chidyamatamba produced a musical celebration, *Sounds of Zimbabwe*.

Drama had a long way to go if it were to become relevant to the new Zimbabwe. In an article in the *Financial Mail*, in August 1980, Dover Wilson castigated establishment theatre:

The insularity bred by 13 years of isolation has resulted in some archaic theatrical attitudes, and a largely uneducated audience. It would appear at first glance that “theatre” in the true sense of the word has failed – particularly when it is noted that anything new or “fringe” is the kiss of death to any show (especially if there is no reference to “comic” or “hilarious” in the advertising).⁶⁰

This article refers to white theatre – the only kind which received media coverage – but, as I demonstrated in the last chapter, establishment-approved black drama was also conformist, and usually comic.

In many areas the state had to consider existing structures and prejudices. Dealing with bodies such as the National Arts Foundation and the National Theatre Organisation meant a choice between accommodation or confrontation with bastions of white conservatism. Yet such organisations could not simply be ignored. In the interests of harmony the government wished to avoid confrontation, and since they lacked a coherent cultural policy it was possibly wise, and probably inevitable, that a piecemeal approach should be taken towards reconstruction. In his study, James Mahaule links this ambivalent stance with the government’s 1984 announcement of the accommodationist National Democratic Revolution, and states:

This was meant to be a period of transition from capitalism to socialism. Such a policy allowed for the existence of colonial establishments such as the REPS and the NTO on the one hand and the development of revolutionary theatre on the other.⁶¹

Pressure for change in white-oriented arts concerns mounted as the National Arts Foundation became responsible for a growing number of predominantly black cul-

⁵⁹ Mbuya Nehanda was the most influential of the mediums during the liberation war. An earlier incarnation had been similarly renowned in the first *chimurenga*. She was therefore both literally and metaphorically “the spirit of *chimurenga*.”

⁶⁰ *Financial Mail* (Harare, August 22, 1980).

⁶¹ James Mahaule, “The Development of Community Theatre in Zimbabwe,” undergraduate thesis, Department of African Languages and Literature, University of Zimbabwe (1989): 2–3.

tural associations. To the ballroom dancers and choral singers were added traditional dancers, popular musicians and visual artists' groups, all wishing to experiment with new Zimbabwean, as opposed to Rhodesian, culture. Although funds available to the Arts Foundation grew, so did administrative costs. Increased pressure on resources meant that pre-independence groups were forced to venture into new areas in search of funding. Often this meant expanding the scope of their activities and beginning to take a more inclusive look at Zimbabwean society.

Under the new Division of Culture, existing drama organisations were required to broaden their remit. Money was given to the National Theatre Organisation to run workshops in the high-density suburbs of Harare, Bulawayo, Redcliff and Mutare. Then, in 1981, came a breakthrough for the credibility of black drama, when Ben Sibenke's play *My Uncle Grey Bonzo*, performed by a new all-black group, "The People's Theatre Company" (although directed by a white), won the National Theatre Festival. The growing prestige of indigenous theatre was reinforced the following year when Walter Maparutsa became the first black actor to win the National Theatre Organisation's acting award.

Further government initiatives included the promotion of regional and inter-school arts competitions in 1982. In the same year the state-owned publishers, the Zimbabwe Publishing House (ZPH), instituted a playwriting competition. By these means, Shona drama in particular began to develop. Writers such as M.A. Hamutyinei, Charles Mungoshi and Paul Chidyasiku saw their plays regularly performed, and by 1982 ZPH, the Mambo Press and Longmans had all published Shona drama. However, as in Tanzania, nearly all of these initiatives followed the colonial role-model, in that they relied on an annual competition. They were urban-based, with a majority of participants from Harare. In the second city, Bulawayo, the National Theatre Organisation festival, even in 1983, could attract only one black entrant, and the group concerned put on *Macbeth*. The University ran the only annual festival for the performing arts. For the rest, drama was predominantly literary and still concerned only an urban educated élite.

Government uncertainty about the role and importance to be ascribed to culture was also reflected in educational policy. Performance arts were promoted only when individual teachers or students initiated projects on an extra-curricular basis. Shortly after the Division of Culture was moved from the Ministry of Education in 1984, Zimbabwe's only teacher training college offering a course in theatre, at Hillside College outside Bulawayo, was closed down, as was the Kwandondoma traditional-music school. Given the importance placed on educational development by the independence government, these decisions speak loudly about the lack of basic commitment to culture in the new Zimbabwe.

In only one area has the government been responsible for stimulating a truly dynamic theatrical development. The Zimbabwe Community Based Theatre Project,

organised under the aegis of the Zimbabwe Foundation for Education with Production (ZIMFEP), has revolutionised the world of Zimbabwean theatre and resulted in a popular cultural movement involving many thousands of participants.

*The ZIMFEP initiative*⁶²

During the war many black youths had had their education interrupted by schools closures and by the decision to join the guerrillas in exile. After independence these people were eager to resume their education, but in many cases there were no places available in existing schools. Moreover, the ex-guerrillas did not always fit well into conventional schools. They were often older than other pupils and far more independent-minded. There was also a problem of numerous children who had lost their families in the fighting and had no homes.

To deal with these problems the ex-combatants set up ZIMFEP. Based on principles similar to those of Paulo Freire, schools were built by pupils who also worked in the fields or on money-making projects in order to support themselves and their education. Work and study were intended to be integrated, and learning was to be community-based rather than abstractly academic. When the Division of Culture sought to find ways to make theatre more participatory, ZIMFEP was an obvious partner for the experiment. So, in 1982, the Zimbabwe Community Based Theatre Project was set up under ZIMFEP, with three declared aims:

- to facilitate the establishment of urban and rural community theatre groups;
- to encourage community participation in theatre as a way of instilling self-confidence, creativity, organizational skills, critical awareness of environment, history and culture;
- to help in the development of theatre skills (eg, evolving a play, scripting, directing, acting, etc) and to create audience demand for these skills.⁶³

The programme was the brainchild of two exiled Kenyans, Ngugi wa Mirii and Kimani Gecau, who had come to Zimbabwe when President Moi's government cracked down on the nascent radical community theatre in Kenya. Ngugi and Kimani had both been closely involved in the Kamiriithu community project, which created consciousness-raising people's drama to such effect that the right-wing Kenyan government banned its work and detained its prime mover, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, without trial for a year.

⁶² For information on the ZIMFEP theatre-project, I have called on James W. Mahaule's undergraduate thesis, "The Development of Community Theatre in Zimbabwe." I was also fortunate in that ZIMFEP allowed me access to some of their unpublished papers, and for interviews on the subject with Kimani Gecau, Ngugi wa Mirii, Mrs Praxides Chikerema, Stephen Chifunye, and Titus Moetsabi.

⁶³ Ngugi wa Mirii, "Some Ways Towards a People's Theatre," *Moto* 51 (Gweru): 11.

The ZIMFEP project has been an outstanding success which by 1990 resulted in a national organisation, ZACT (Zimbabwe Association for Community Theatre), with over two hundred member groups spread throughout the nation. In view of this achievement, it is important to discuss how the programme could rouse so many people to independent action in a way which is not remotely paralleled in either of the other two countries under discussion. A crucial factor is that the programme was allowed to develop without direct government control. Themes for productions were not given from above, as happens in Tanzania, and participants were never under the kind of close government supervision which routinely operates in Ethiopia. The whole ethos of ZIMFEP was to be independent and questioning within a broadly socialist framework. This philosophy appears to have touched a chord with participants in the community-theatre programme, as did the attitude of self-help for employment in the arts which was integral to the scheme. The organisers were available to train and facilitate, but not to dictate content or style. Moreover, these same organisers were experienced and committed to community theatre. They were not bureaucrats, state ideologues or remote, élite figures, as has so often been the case amongst those commissioned to promote people's art. Nor were they bringing art down from above to show how it should be done. The politicising process of the civil war has also to be taken into account. The guerrilla-led *pungwes* are seen as the direct progenitor of the ZIMFEP theatre-project. They and the events of the liberation war had taught large numbers of Zimbabweans to become articulate in their political demands. Finally, superior Zimbabwean sophistication was related to the relative wealth and development of the nation, which allowed for both educational and leisure-time activities. This increased amount of free time meant that communities were more likely to be receptive to the idea of volunteering for involvement in cultural activities.

The project was launched by the Minister of Education and Culture at the ZIMFEP Chindunduma Secondary School, and *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*,⁶⁴ which tells of Kenya's Mau Mau war, was selected as the first production. Although some Zimbabwean theatre practitioners had reservations about using a Kenyan play to inaugurate the programme, Kimani Gecau told me that the play was chosen not only because strong parallels can be drawn between the guerrilla struggles in Kenya and in Zimbabwe, but also because the Kimiriithu group had been invited by ZIMFEP to take *Dedan Kimathi* on a tour of Zimbabwe before President Moi forced them to close.⁶⁵

The production team was made up of students, teachers, peasants and workers from the surrounding area. Gecau told me that some of these workers initially saw the

⁶⁴ Ngugi wa Thiong'o & Micere Mugo, *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* (London: Heinemann, 1976).

⁶⁵ Interview with Kimani Gecau, Harare, September, 1990.

project as a game only suitable for children. Indeed, several Zimbabwean theatre practitioners have commented to me that the use of the word "play" for both children's games and drama productions is often seen as a direct correlation by those unused to theatre. This can lead to resistance in some areas, particularly, I was told, amongst men, to becoming involved in a despised children's activity. However, as work progressed this view was substantially modified. Although the final Shona script stuck closely to the Kenyan original, the cast had carried out extensive improvisations during the rehearsal process, and much local dance and music was incorporated into the final production. Local performances based at an open-air theatre specially built at Penga Penga Growth Point were immensely successful, and the Ministry subsequently sponsored a tour around several regions. Gecau says that this tour provoked widespread interest in the idea of community theatre, so that workshops were subsequently held by ZIMFEP and the Ministry in various centres.

At Chindunduma, students continued producing drama in the same vein as work previously done in exile. The first signs of conflict with the authorities arose when a play was improvised detailing sexual harassment of female students by staff. The school's headmaster understandably disliked the piece, and reverberations of the ensuing argument over freedom of expression reached right up to ministerial level.

The next development in promoting community theatre was an invitation to "Kanyama Theatre" to come and mount a national tour. Kanyama are a Zambian company, and the important point about them from the point of view of ZIMFEP's work-creation scheme for theatre was that they were a group of four school leavers who had made themselves into a viable professional company. By all accounts, this tour was enormously successful. When a major workshop was subsequently planned at Murehwa, over a hundred participants from several countries in Africa gathered to debate and experiment with "theatre for conscientization and mobilization."⁶⁶ Local people from all wards in the area took part in practical sessions during this workshop, and much of their output demanded political change. Government support was demonstrated by the building of a cultural centre at Murehwa, but there was official unease at the level of political criticism displayed in performances. The Under Secretary to the Division of Culture, who came to view performances, subsequently described theatre as "a double-edged sword."⁶⁷

Here one can see signs of growing government reserve regarding approval of uncensored promotion of the performing arts and the beginnings of attempts to limit the scope of community-based theatre. Any theatre which politicised and mobilised the people had been acceptable within the context of the *chimurenga* struggle, even if

⁶⁶ Kaarsholm, *Theatre, Democracy and Cultural Struggle*, 25.

⁶⁷ This was described to me in an interview with Mrs Praxides Chikerema, ZIMFEP Head of Community Education and Theatre, February, 1990.

some productions in exile were critical of authority-figures. Indeed, some of the most senior of the ZANU leadership had taken part in performances in the bush. However, once guerrilla leaders became national politicians their capacity to absorb criticism lessened as awareness of their own prestige increased. Liberation had been won, and the leaderships' attitude was increasingly that it was now subversive to question the means they chose to build a new socialist society. To pick on local issues like sexual harassment in a school or failings in local government was equated with letting down the ZANU (PF) régime, which should be trusted and given time to deal with such "petty" problems. Essentially, community groups were warned that there was a line to be drawn between community and political issues, and, impossible as such a line might be to patrol, theatre was required to keep to the community side of it.

Kaarsholm claims that "theatre for development" was advocated by some senior Ministry and ZIMFEP figures, in opposition to the model of community theatre for politicisation. When Kaarsholm suggests that this concept was borrowed from Zambia, he is implying the involvement of the highly energetic Stephen Chifunyise.⁶⁸ Chifunyise is a Zimbabwean who was brought up in southern Zambia. He lectured in theatre at the University in Lusaka and subsequently became Director of Culture for Zambia. In 1983 Chifunyise returned to Zimbabwe and worked at the Division of Culture for several years, besides becoming involved in numerous voluntary theatre-projects. In fact, the concept of theatre for development has been widely used for many years in the Third World to discuss such issues as health, education, and the eradication of conservative attitudes to change and the oppression of women. That Chifunyise does value such drama can be seen in his volume of plays, *Medicine for Love and other plays*,⁶⁹ which looks critically at such traditional customs as the use of love-potions and the payment of bride-price, at attitudes towards rape, and at the problems of reintegrating ex-prisoners into normal life. The problem with theatre for development is that it tends to presume to tell people what is best for them, usually construing "best" in terms of modern, often westernised, values. Such theatre commonly displays little respect for traditional customs, which are often the focus of mocking condescension. Above all, theatre for development usually expounds policy rather than exploring issues with those most closely involved in their resolution. It is ultimately a tool for control rather than an enabling implement for use by the people.

In 1983 problems of defining the kinds of community theatre which would be encouraged by the state were only beginning to emerge. As a result of the Murehwa workshop, a Union of African Performing Artists was formed to try and give theatre

⁶⁸ Kaarsholm, *Theatre, Democracy and Cultural Struggle*, 25.

⁶⁹ Stephen Chifunyise, *Medicine for Love and other plays* (Gweru: Mambo, 1984).

practitioners an international forum and to protect their interests. On the domestic level, a whole series of new community theatre groups began to form. In 1984 ZIMFEP sponsored the first full-time community theatre company, "Kodzero Dsevashandi" (The Workers Theatre Cooperative), made up of school-leavers. By 1985 the company was touring extensively to promote community drama. The health of campaigning political theatre was also demonstrated by the creation of "Vashandi Theatre Group" (Workers Theatre Group), which grew out of a campaign against police harassment of women on the streets of Harare.

Major recognition for ZIMFEP's theatre work came in 1985, when the Ford Foundation gave US\$75,000 to expand the project. This input facilitated many more workshops and the formation of a range of theatre groups involving many sections of society – the disabled, women's groups, industrial workers, school-leavers, unemployed, domestic workers, and rural communities. Moreover, these groups organised themselves in a range of different ways, taking up various types of drama, ranging from street-theatre sketches through adaptations of major novels to Marxist agit-prop. The enthusiasm behind the movement and the conviction of members that they had an important role in community political life are in themselves a credit to the relative freedom the government has allowed in the development of community-based theatre. If one has to record a specific moment when the movement reached maturity, it must be when the Zimbabwe Association of Community Theatre (ZACT) was officially formed in March 1987, allowing community theatre to wean itself from ZIMFEP and government support and control.

University drama

The University of Zimbabwe did not have a separate drama department until 1992. However, in 1984 Robert McLaren was appointed to start drama courses in the Faculty of Arts. Several commentators have noted the dynamic impact of this decision on Zimbabwean theatre.

Robert McLaren must be counted, along with the Kenyans Ngugi and Kimani Gecau and the returned exile Stephen Chifunyise, as part of the group of committed socialist community-theatre workers who inspired much of the new Zimbabwean theatre movement. This is not to say that they have always worked amicably, either with each other or with government. At the time of writing, McLaren and the Kenyans are barely on speaking terms, while all except Gecau have turned their theatrical efforts more and more towards the voluntary sector, as official constraints have inhibited work within government bodies. What is notable about this group is that it is made up of experienced outsiders who arrived in Zimbabwe with strong beliefs about the function and value of people's theatre. Their impact on a body of people already used to culture being used for politicisation purposes in *pungwes* but without much theoretical background or training in community theatre has produced a part-

nership unique in the history of the growth of African national theatres. In Tanzania, Rugyendo, Leshoai and Fiebach had started a somewhat similar process at the University of Dar es Salaam, but their input was limited both in terms of time and area of influence, whereas the dramaturges of Zimbabwe have influenced nationwide, on-going drama movements. It may also seem strange that the ex-combatants themselves did not take more of the initiative in starting up post-independence theatre groups. However, Stephen Chifunyise told me that he felt at least one factor had been taken into consideration: after the war most leaders of cultural activity were more interested either in becoming involved in senior-level politics or in securing safe and, if possible, lucrative employment than they were with the precarious business of arts initiatives.⁷⁰

McLaren is a South African who was involved in township drama in the Seventies before he left his country, initially to do a Ph.D. in Britain and then to work for the Theatre Arts Department of Addis Ababa University. He is a committed Marxist, with an understandable prime concern with South Africa's freedom struggle. He is also extremely outspoken in all his views, a quality which has given rise to difficulties in both Ethiopia and Zimbabwe. Undeniably impressive are the man's energy, his commitment to radical drama, and the way in which he has harnessed song, dance and mime to reach out to indigenous audiences. In this he has much in common with the early *pungwe* dramatists and the initiators of the Zimbabwe community theatre movement. They all broke through the barrier of naturalistic drama, which for so long limited colonially controlled theatre, and started to use specifically African performance forms to make contemporarily relevant plays.

Unlike the situation in Tanzania, McLaren did not encounter the problem of a department staffed by literary playwrights who would appear élitist despite their best intentions. He was also able to ally his work with that of the ZIMFEP theatre programme. The University initially provided theatre courses for students of English, Ndebele and Shona, and these made up the Faculty of Arts Drama programme. Three productions were mounted with these students in 1985, and these made a significant impact. *Mavambo* (First Steps) was an adaptation of the nationalist Zimbabwean novel *A Son of the Soil*, by Wilson Katiyo: it was performed at the University before touring Harare's high-density suburbs.⁷¹ *A Son of the Soil* was followed by a piece called *The Adamant Eve*, devised especially for an International Writer's Workshop on Women, which availed itself of student research in order to examine the place of women in the new Zimbabwe. Finally, *Okusemsamo* (the Ndebele title)

⁷⁰ Interview with Stephen Chifunyise, Bulawayo, September 1990.

⁷¹ "High-density suburb" is the official term for what were in the pre-independence era segregated black townships. The old white areas with their sprawling residential properties, often set in extensive grounds, are now known as "low-density suburbs."

or *Seri Kwesasa* (the Shona version of what is in English "Behind the Door") was based on actual cases in community courts. Performed in a mixture of Shona, Ndebele and English, the play toured as far as Bulawayo and claimed to be "not a Shona or a Ndebele play but a Zimbabwean one."⁷²

A most important point to make about these plays was that they were multi-lingual. Limited experiments with plays in two of Zimbabwe's three national languages had taken place before, as in *Svikiro* and in plays devised in the camps in Mozambique, but it was McLaren in Harare and a young innovator in Bulawayo, Cont Mhlanga, who established the idea as a viable way of crossing cultural barriers and working towards a national, non-racial Zimbabwean culture. The idea has subsequently been adopted by many of Zimbabwe's more successful community-based theatre groups, because it makes plays available to the whole country which would previously have reached only specific regions or ethnic groups.

As a committed Marxist, McLaren also pioneered sophisticated agit-prop drama in Zimbabwe, proving that such plays can combine the demands of entertainment and didacticism. After the first year's programme at the University, the South African went on to form a specifically political drama group, "Izibuko/Zambuko" (Bridge),⁷³ which brought together lecturers, students and workers. The group has managed to maintain state approval by putting on a majority of plays about freedom struggles in neighbouring countries such as Mozambique and South Africa (to such an extent that other practitioners joke that now South Africa is free the company will have to close down), but one wonders what the state response would be to such uncompromising political drama if its focus were turned to the home régime. In the meantime, the high performance standards and topicality of Izibuko/Zambuko's work have brought the group considerable renown, and major tours have been assisted by the University, government and a variety of sponsors.⁷⁴

McLaren's anti-élitist approach to drama caused him not only to become involved with Izibuko/Zambuko, but also to run courses available to non-university students. He actively supports Faculty of Arts Drama, remaining a service to both other University departments and outsiders. His rationale for supporting non-exclusive university drama courses is that he seeks to make theatre a truly popular cultural vehicle. He argues that, in the absence of an established professional theatre, exclusive drama courses fit students only for unemployment, whereas to run

⁷² *Zimbabwe Theatre Report* 1.3.

⁷³ "Zambuko/Izibuko" chose to give their group a dual Shona/Ndebele name to underline their policy of creating national, non-racial theatre.

⁷⁴ For example, the "Zambuko/Izibuko" production of *Mandela* received substantial financial support from both the Zimbabwean government and the South African ANC.

drama courses for a variety of workers enables theatre to be applied to all sorts of educational and politicising contexts.

*"Amakhosi Theatre Productions"
and the Bulawayo Association of Drama Groups*⁷⁵

The final group of community-theatre practitioners I wish to single out here as a preeminent example of the type of work going on in Zimbabwe are the Bulawayo-based company "Amakhosi Theatre Productions." Bulawayo is Zimbabwe's second city, and the centre of Matabeleland. Since independence, some thirty theatre groups have sprung up within the city. Many are affiliated, not to ZACT, but to the independent Bulawayo Association of Drama Groups (BADG), and several receive support from the National Theatre Organisation. The foremost of these companies is Amakhosi.

Amakhosi was the brainchild of an ex-factory foreman. Cont Mhlanga's involvement in community activities started in 1978 with a karate club run in the Bulawayo township of Makakoba. In 1980, Mhlanga was annoyed when his club's regular meeting was interrupted by its venue at Stanley Hall being requisitioned for an NTO drama workshop. He called in to see what was happening and was promptly hooked on theatre. The karate club took part in NTO workshops in 1980–81. In 1983 Cont Mhlanga wrote his first play, incorporating extensive karate scenes, which he called *Children, Children*.

Cont Mhlanga is exceptional amongst the playwrights and directors I am considering, primarily because he is a product of urban township life. In neither Tanzania nor Ethiopia have prominent dramaturges appeared except from amongst the educated élite. By contrast, in Zimbabwe the community-theatre movement is spawning a whole new generation of impresarios whose roots are very much among the people. Mhlanga, at least, is aware of the importance of his background, and his commitment to the township remains central to his work. This is not to say that the members of Amakhosi are not ambitious for wider recognition – they are; but their primary audience is the people of Makokoba, where all their plays are premiered (see Figs. 25–26). Amakhosi's plays are based on their director's observations of everyday life, out of which he produces themes and scripts from which his actors work to create dramas with which they too can identify. When he found that the action-oriented style of *Children, Children* attracted an almost exclusively youth audience, Cont Mhlanga set out to find what input was needed to attract older members of the community. This resulted in the company's commissioning an old

⁷⁵ Information in this section was gathered largely during time I spent with "Amakhosi" in Bulawayo in October 1990, where they kindly allowed me access to their files and gave me the opportunity to speak with all members of the company.

man to teach them the traditional dances their generation had never learnt for incorporation in future plays. When the playwright found he had had a turnover of seventy female performers in the space of four years, he went to all the women's parents and then held a party to which he invited all their boyfriends, in order to explain the ethos of his company and to break down the preconceptions which commonly regarded women actors as immoral. Since that time several women have worked with him for up to five years.

In 1986 the policy of action-oriented people's plays bore fruit when Amakhosi's *Nansi le ndoda* (Behold The Man) won the National Theatre Organisation's Festival and toured successfully both in Zimbabwe and Botswana. *Nansi le ndoda* deals with contemporary Zimbabwean problems of youth unemployment, nepotism, and the sexual abuse of women. It is action-packed, and has no compunction about mixing tragedy, melodrama, comedy and karate – an eclectic blend which possibly only a man of Mhlanga's training-through-practice would either dare or successfully bring off. Kaarsholm, an avowed admirer of Amakhosi, also makes the point that unlike much development-oriented community theatre, or the University-based agit-prop of Robert McLaren, Mhlanga's style in *Nansi le ndoda* is one of "discussion" theatre:

The play looks at the world from the point of view of the underdog, in this case a highly qualified young person who is unable to find a job. Judgement is passed, but not as a final solution to the conflicts of the plot, rather as something to be thought about and debated.⁷⁶

Amakhosi went professional in 1986. Its members remain extremely poor, as they are not paid for rehearsal-time, and its productions are still viewed with some distrust by the government. Nonetheless, the group cannot meet all the requests made for performances. Amakhosi produces all its plays in "Ndenglish," Cont Mhlanga's term for a mixture of Ndebele and English which he says is representative of the Bulawayo "*povo*" – the people – and the method he was using to reach a range of audiences even before McLaren's initiatives in the same direction.

Published drama

The final area I wish to consider in the complex picture of post-independence Zimbabwean theatre is published drama. Many of the writers whose work was published in the first years after liberation had their roots in the reactionary, white-sponsored tradition of the UDI period. The drama they produced continued in the old style, avoiding the burning issues of the new Zimbabwe and dealing exclusively with black social issues, and taking a heavily moral, often Christian line. In this category one can include Charles Mungoshi's *Inongova Njakenjake* (Each Does His Own Thing), Ben Sibenke's *My Uncle Grey Bonzo*, T.K. Tsodzo's *Tsano* (Brother-in-law),

⁷⁶ Kaarsholm, *Theatre, Democracy and Cultural Struggle*, 28.

ILLUSTRATIONS



ETHIOPIA

FIGURES 1 (TOP) AND 2 (BOTTOM): *Ethiopian dancing priests of the Orthodox Church. Addis Ababa, "Timket festival," 1985.*



ETHIOPIA

FIGURES 3 (TOP) AND 4 (BOTTOM): *Hoda Yifejew* by Fisseha Beley, performed by students of the Theatre Arts Department of Addis Ababa University.



ETHIOPIA

FIGURE 5 (TOP): Singer in traditional Amhara warrior dress. FIGURE 6 (BOTTOM): Dancers in traditional Ethiopian highland dress. Both photos were taken at Yet Nora village; the scenes represent the culmination of a six-months amateur arts training programme.



ETHIOPIA

FIGURES 7 (TOP) AND 8 (BOTTOM): *Devised play about alcohol abuse and wife-beating. Play created and theatre built by Yet Nora villagers.*



ETHIOPIA

FIGURE 9 (TOP): *Addis Ababa University Cultural Centre*. FIGURE 10 (BOTTOM): *The Ager Fikir Theatre, Addis Ababa*.



ETHIOPIA

Schools tour of adaptations of Ethiopian folktales by university students.
 FIGURE 11 (TOP): At Addis Alem orphanage. FIGURE 12 (BOTTOM): An urban primary school in Addis Ababa.



ETHIOPIA

Schools tour audiences in Debre Zeit (FIGURE 13, TOP) and Addis Ababa (FIGURE 14, BOTTOM).



TANZANIA

Bagamoyo Festival: Kwaya performers (FIGURE 15, TOP) and acrobats (FIGURE 16, BOTTOM).



TANZANIA

FIGURES 17 (TOP) AND 18 (BOTTOM): *The Bagamoyo ngoma troupe performing at the Dar es Salaam International School.*



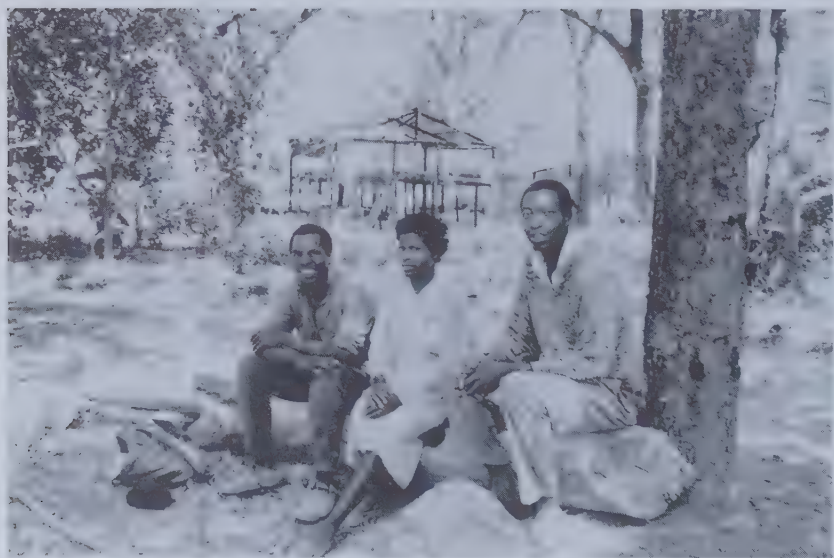
TANZANIA

FIGURES 19 (TOP) AND 20 (BOTTOM): *Theatre as performed by urban cultural troupes in Dar es Salaam beer halls.*



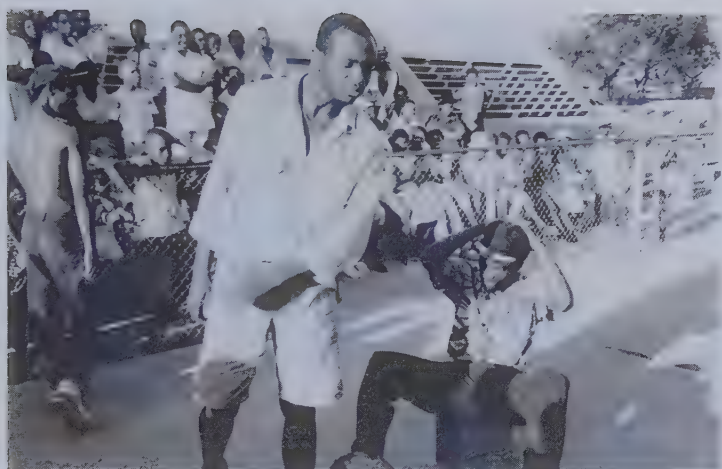
ZIMBABWE

FIGURES 21 (TOP) AND 22 (BOTTOM): Elizabeth Ncube, Ndebele praise-poet, performing in traditional dress at Cold Comfort Farm outside Harare.



ZIMBABWE

FIGURE 23 (TOP): White amateur provincial theatre. FIGURE 24 (BOTTOM): Actors from Fambidzanai at the cooperative farm where they work part-time between theatre stints.



ZIMBABWE

FIGURES 25 (TOP) AND 26 (BOTTOM): *Amakhosi Theatre in rehearsal in the open air, Makokoba High Density Area, Bulawayo.*

O.P. Nyika's *Ndindawo Mwana* (I Want a Child), Aaron C. Moyo's *Chenga Ose* (Do Not Discriminate) and Bertha Msora's *I Will Wait*, all of which were published between 1980 and 1984.

There exists little critical material about these plays. This may be partly because they are too simplistic to warrant in-depth analysis and have contributed little to any relevant discussion of the new state. Mahaule accuses *Tsano* of being "cheap entertainment"⁷⁷ which makes people laugh at such problems as unemployment and the oppression of women instead of addressing them seriously, while Zinyemba comments that the satire and morality of *My Uncle Grey Bonzo*, which examines the erosion of familial responsibility amongst the black middle class, is tediously farcical.⁷⁸ I have been unable to find any critical material on the small body of Ndebele drama which was published in this period.⁷⁹ In an under-researched post-colonial drama tradition, Ndebele plays are accorded even less attention than Shona scripts.

What is notable in early post-independence Zimbabwean theatre, and contrasts strongly with the picture in Ethiopia or Tanzania, is that after some initial support by the state for new cultural organisations and re-organisation of old ones to get rid of obvious racist bias, further developments have been spearheaded by independent bodies. Moreover, funding for these ventures has come from a range of independent and often foreign agencies. Many theatre practitioners commented to me that they felt government saw theatre as irrelevant, and that, when it was found that the arts would not be blandly supportive of the state, officials had generally decided to ignore them. Yet one cannot ignore the fact that, under this same state, theatre in many areas boomed in the early Eighties. In the next chapter, I will demonstrate how, under independent management, Zimbabwean theatre would continue to develop, so that it is now undoubtedly the most dynamic and politically relevant of the three theatres I am examining.



⁷⁷ Mahaule, 10.

⁷⁸ Zinyemba, 26.

⁷⁹ Only three Ndebele plays were published during this period. Canaan S. Banana wrote *Sponono Sami* (My Beautiful One; Gwelo, 1982); *Ibuza Kwabaphambili* (Wisdom Begets Age; Harare, 1981) was by Stephen J. Mhlali; and Leonard Sidambe produced *Ilizwi Lenkosi Yilizwe Lesizwe* (The King's Edict is the Voice of the People; Gweru, 1982).

5

DISILLUSION AND DEBATE THE CONTEMPORARY THEATRES

IN THIS FINAL CHAPTER I shall be discussing the process of artists' disillusionment with contemporary governments, and how the states concerned have sought to deal with theatres of growing dissent. In all three nations I am examining, the elation of independence lasted only relatively few years. In each case the optimism which greeted the achievement of full nation-status, or of revolution, was to give way to a growing sense of disillusion with the political leadership. Governments which based their credibility on representing the will of the people were gradually felt to be distancing themselves from those people, and to be ruling increasingly in a "top-down" manner which denied any real power-sharing with the mass of the populace. Moreover, significant numbers, though by no means all, of the leadership groupings, whether at local, regional or national levels, were increasingly believed, and in some cases publicly proven, to be corrupt. This led to crises in confidence, both in prominent individuals and, by extension, in the political parties from which they claimed authority.

Disillusion with the political process might have been acceptable if independent and revolutionary governments had been able to deliver on expectations that they would provide an improvement in material living-standards. However, the mid-Seventies world oil-crisis led directly to a drop in the relative value of many primary products which acutely affected African producers. As a result, many social-improvement programmes were pushed into reverse, African nations were forced to seek ever more assistance from Western governments and from bodies like the International Monetary Fund, and most African nations have experienced an absolute decline in overall living-standards. Increasing poverty has been a major source of political disillusionment.

All of these factors have resulted in many theatre practitioners moving away from their earlier identification with the state, and starting to criticise what they often see as a betrayal of the liberation struggle by the new ruling class. In no case

has that ruling class proved able to tolerate freely the growth of an artistic movement of dissent, any more than it has been able to accept political opposition in any sphere of public life.

The methods governments have used to control the theatres have varied. Censorship has ranged from rigid state-control in Ethiopia, until the overthrow of the Mengistu regime in 1991, to the threat of censorship or the creation of an atmosphere which has imposed self-censorship on writers and performers in Tanzania and Zimbabwe. Governments have also at various times poured money into the activities of those they approved of, while choking off dissenters by denying them facilities, publicity and funds or, more simply, by ignoring them. Increasingly, government reaction to culture has been to side-line it. Artists are approved of in the post-colonial era only so long as they offer the state uncritical support. The attitude of too many such governments has been that, once liberation has been achieved, the conscientisation process can stop, and all political education can be safely left in the hands of the ruling party, to be passed down as unquestionable wisdom to the waiting masses.

Theatre practitioners are not now looking only at social issues and local abuses of power. In recent years they have moved from a largely nationalistic perspective to question the broader role of the arts in the development of Third-World nations. This discussion is especially pertinent to the nations studied here, given the current crisis in world socialism. As the socialist régimes of Eastern Europe have crumbled, there has been an inevitable knock-on effect in the socialist states of Africa. This can most clearly be seen in Ethiopia, where the withdrawal of Soviet support precipitated a crisis for the government which finally led to its downfall. In Tanzania the ideals of *ujamaa* are under question, while Mugabe's insistence on the retention of Marxist rhetoric in Zimbabwe appears increasingly anachronistic. The continued existence of the one-party state, so common throughout Eastern and Southern Africa, is also under growing attack. Finally, on the economic front, Third-World states are all fearful that the opening up of Eastern Europe will lead to a massive diversion of Western aid to the latter group of countries which will endanger African development programmes. The future of socialist Africa has suddenly become a focus of far more radical debate than has existed at any time since independence. Performance artists wish to participate in that debate, but governments are extremely wary of a force operating outside state control, which has demonstrated its capacity to appeal to large numbers of the people, and which has in the past been a significant force for change.

Cultural activists in Africa have also been claiming that Third-World governments have too readily accepted Western capitalist values which see development in purely economic terms. Among the countries I am considering, this debate has a particularly high profile in Tanzania, where it can easily be related to some, at least,

of the ideals of *ujamaa*.¹ The argument goes, that acceptance of the stress placed by capitalism on purely economic targets denies a holistic approach to development which would take more into account social issues, concerns regarding environment, and sustainability of development projects and cultural values. Sympathy with cultural values would mean giving greater respect to indigenous life-styles and including cultural-action programmes at every level as part of the expression of a society, as a means of celebration, and as tools of political and social explication and debate.

Leading on from this desire for a broader view of development objectives is the debate about the kind of cultural values a holistically minded African government would seek to promote. Both Tanzanian and Zimbabwean artists have expressed concern about the levels of cultural imperialism their countries continue to experience.² They are concerned that post-colonial governments still allow the import of material promoting, with minimal constraints, anti-social capitalist values. Cultural censorship of foreign imports is frequently seen in exclusively sexual terms. Zimbabwean television apparently sees no contradiction of its stated Marxism in allowing the serialisation of such shows as *Dallas* and *Dynasty*, shows which are irrelevant to the vast majority of Americans, let alone to the average Zimbabwean. In all three of the countries I have studied, extremely violent films featuring Kung Fu, Ninja and the exploits of such racist and sexist heroes as Rambo are freely imported. Indeed, party groups and local councils themselves promote such events as fund-raising exercises. None of the governments with which I am here concerned has tried to break with such invidious imperialism, except on the petty moral level, as when Louis Mbughuni and Gabriel Ruhumbika complain that in Tanzania:

One is hardly aware of any national cultural action, apart from football and occasional outbursts of anger from our political leaders against shameful dressing habits, especially those of our young ladies residing in towns.³

¹ See E. Jengo, "Towards a National Cultural Policy for the Promotion of Art in Tanzania", *Utafiti* 7.1 (Dar es Salaam, 1985): 1-8; Amandina Lihamba, "Politics and Theatre in Tanzania after the Arusha Declaration," ch. 6; Lee Nichols, "Penina Mlama," *Conversations with African Writers* (Washington DC: Voice of America, 1981): 139-49; Ngugi wa Mirii, *Community Arts and the Question of Culture in the City of Harare* (Harare: ZIMFEP, 1989), and Micere Mugo, *Culture and Imperialism* (Harare, 1987).

² See Jengo, "Towards a National Cultural Policy"; Penina Mlama, "Tanzania's Cultural Policy and its Implications for the Contribution of the Arts to Socialist Development," *Utafiti* 7.1 (Dar es Salaam, 1985): 9-19; Ngugi wa Mirii, *Community Arts and the Question of Culture in the City of Harare*; and Micere Mugo, *Culture and Imperialism*.

³ Gabriel Ruhumbika & L.A. Mbughuni, "TANU and National Culture," in *Towards Ujamaa: Twenty Years of TANU Leadership*, ed. Gabriel Ruhumbika (Dar es Salaam: East African Literature Bureau, 1974): 279.

The positive discrimination which would be necessary to promote both national and other African, Third-World or socialist cultures has, other than at the simplistic level of blatant propaganda or "airport culture," been singularly ignored. Such government policies imply either acquiescence at a basic level with capitalist dominance, or a fundamental dismissal of the importance of culture in determining attitudes and values in society.

By no means all contemporary theatre in Ethiopia, Tanzania and Zimbabwe is politically or socially confrontational. Indeed, the political theatre movement which was such a powerful force in the Ethiopian revolution was ultimately silenced by Mengistu's government. However, as the socialist African states are forced to reassess their future, and to consider devolving some of the monolithic structures of bureaucratic socialism, the role of performance art and the latitude theatre workers will be given to participate in the discussion of current social and political concerns becomes a matter of commensurately heightened interest.

TANZANIA

The apotheosis of the one-party state?

By the mid-Seventies TANU (and later the CCM) had achieved a position of almost unquestionable authority throughout Tanzania. Trade-union opposition had been suppressed. Villagisation was being rapidly enforced, and for the mass of the population the party, led by the still hugely popular Julius Nyerere, incarnated united, *ujamaa*ist Tanzania. The country might remain poor, but it was proud of its national identity, social programmes and position as major supporter of the liberation struggles of Southern Africa. The "just" war to liberate Uganda from the tyranny of Idi Amin in 1978–79 would add to this self-image of moral excellence. Unfortunately, there was a major drawback to Nyerere's and the party's success, in that the absolute nature of their authority suppressed non-official dynamism. I agree on this point with Coulson, who says that "the social order stressed innovation imposed from above, and people waited for changes to come; they had little incentive to innovate for themselves."⁴ Here one has to understand the pervasive structure of the party. Every group of ten households was organised into a party cell, which fed into the village, provincial and finally the national organisation. Similar structures governed the work-place. Moreover, although it has never been an officially recognised policy, it is widely acknowledged that it is necessary to join the party before one can become eligible for a senior state position. Before the dominance of the party all

⁴ Coulson, *Tanzania: A Political Economy*, 223.

other power structures, including parliament, became to a greater or lesser degree mere ciphers. Even now, party rule is accepted as a fact of life by many Tanzanians, particularly in rural areas. It is not a question of viewing the CCM as good or bad, in spite of growing accusations of corruption against all levels of party functionaries. The structures of power are simply so monolithic, and have been in place for such a relatively long time, that it is hard for unsophisticated citizens to see how radical change could be effected or how they could take part in such a process.

However, from the mid-Seventies voices of dissent did begin to be heard. It became obvious that government policies which concentrated on rural development and failed to expand industry might prevent a growth in inequality of income distribution, but at the same time they retarded overall economic expansion. High inflation in the late Seventies reduced the real value of wages. Although Tanzania became a major recipient of foreign aid, especially from the Scandinavian countries, which favoured the nation's "self-help" philosophy, conditions worsened in the Eighties as stagnation became endemic throughout the economy. Such problems are by no means unique to Tanzania. Adverse terms of trade have affected much of the Third World in the past decade. The criticisms which analysts target specifically at Tanzania relate mostly to the party's inability to initiate effective strategies to ease economic problems and to the stifling of non-party-led initiatives among the people.

In 1985 Julius Nyerere became one of very few African leaders to relinquish power voluntarily, when he stepped down from the Presidency. He did retain the powerful chairmanship of Chama Cha Mapinduzi until August 1990, but the hand-over of power to president Ali Hassan Mwinyi was accomplished remarkably smoothly. Under Mwinyi, party dominance has remained intact but there has been a gradual liberalisation of the economy – paralleled by complaints that Tanzania is now being controlled by the IMF and of increasing corruption. In 1990 Nyerere posited the idea that maybe the time had come for Tanzania to become a multi-party (although still a socialist) state, and this gave rise to widespread debate. There have also been increasingly vociferous complaints that state wages are now worth so little as to be untenable. Student unrest over a wide range of political, social and economic issues led to the University's summary closure for much of 1990, and there has been a rise in the critical independent press.

These are signs that Tanzanians are beginning to consider change, and to seek to bring about that change outside the organs of the CCM for the first time in many years. However, it remains unclear what new direction might be chosen, and most vocal demands for structural reorganisation originate from the still relatively small urban populace. The rural party base remains intact, and in spite of recent debate as to how the CCM could reorder itself to take more account of grass-roots feeling, vested interests seem set to retard any meaningful alteration to political structures for some time to come.

Complacency and conformity: state arts

The negative attitudes towards theatre acquired during the colonial period affected the position of Tanzanian traditional theatre even after the attainment of Independence. The values and potentialities of this theatre continued to be neglected in spite of the independent nation's intention to promote a Tanzanian culture. Efforts to promote traditional theatre have not gone beyond promoting just its entertainment value and there is little to suggest the realization that this theatre can be of any other value. Efforts to promote traditional theatre have also been restricted to only one theatre genre, *ngoma*. (Penina Mlamba, "Tanzanian Traditional Theatre as a Pedagogical Institution: The Kaguru Theatre as a Case Study," doctoral dissertation, University of Dar es Salaam, 1983: iii).

Overall, "culture" [has been] treated ambiguously. The state felt that it ought to use plays and films to further its nationalist ideology; part of that ideology was that people should be allowed to criticize the state if need be; yet if the criticism is too severe it became a threat to the state itself. Hence the strict controls on the press, and the strong censorship law for dramatic performances. (Andrew Coulson, *Tanzania: A Political Economy* [Oxford: Clarendon, 1982]: 207).

These two fairly damning indictments of government policy towards both traditional and modern performance culture, by a senior domestic playwright and a British historian respectively, indicate the level of official Tanzanian failure to involve the arts in a dynamic manner (although Coulson's comment on censorship is unjustified; the law may be strict, but it is invoked only in morality cases). The problem centres on the fact that theatre implies the portrayal of some kind of conflict, and, because in the post-*ujamaa* period both government and artists have tended to agree that art should concern itself with political education, that conflict is almost bound to deal with pro and anti-government voices. So long as everyone is in agreement that the party-line is broadly correct, this kind of political theatre is universally acceptable – although it may not be very entertaining or dramatic if the resolution is something of a foregone conclusion. However, since the government bases its credibility on the fact that it is representative of a mass party, reflecting national wishes, it cannot accept or promote as valid any theatre which moves away from conformity with the party-line. Any voices which question the party-line therefore have to be condemned as aberrant. Moreover, the party has become so used to initiating policy that discussion of an issue comes to be seen as criticism, and criticism as treachery. In such an atmosphere, the only theatre which will be promoted will be that which supports party policies. Any desire by audiences to see real conflict in drama is almost entirely ignored, and, as the mass of potential theatregoers move away from wholehearted sympathy with the government, theatre is squeezed: on the one hand, the state denies the validity of questioning drama; on the other, audiences see little merit in turgid agit-prop. Caught in such a double bind, the performance arts are in danger of stagnation and ultimate death.

Tanzanian academics have, over the past twenty years, engaged in lengthy debate over whether or not the government possesses a cultural policy.⁵ This argument seems to me to have been inflated beyond the level of consideration the topic deserves, because, whichever side one comes down on, culture is obviously such a minority concern to the state. The lack of coherent planning backed up by any effective political will seems to me, however, to be clearly reflected in the empirical evidence – first, that culture has come under no fewer than nine ministries since independence,⁶ and second, that plans for cultural infrastructure such as regional performance halls appear to have been on the stocks for twenty years without making any noticeable progress.⁷ As is the case in Zimbabwe, what the cultural planners seem best at doing is to encourage the proliferation of bureaucracy. On this point Lihamba complains that

the thin line that divides Party policy, ideology and bureaucracy from government operations acts as a stumbling block in cultural development for two reasons. First, the weaknesses of one tend to be duplicated in the other and the overlapping of functions mystifies the roles in each sector. Second, in most cases, the functionaries have tended to be the same in both Party and government systems. In spite of this diffusion between Party and Government, there has been lack of coordination and integration resulting at times in contradictory practices towards similar goals.⁸

This problem of duplication and confusion between party and state structures is common to many one-party states. When, as in Tanzania and Zimbabwe, the further bureaucratic layer of a national arts council is added, cultural planning and implementation can become drowned in an ocean of administration which swallows up central funding and gives precious little assistance to artists themselves.

In spite of these criticisms, some cultural initiatives since the mid-Seventies have had their origin in the Ministry of Culture. First, the National Cultural Troupes

⁵ See, arguing that there is a national cultural policy, L.A. Mbughuni, *The Cultural Policy of the United Republic of Tanzania* (Paris: UNESCO, 1974), and, against this contention, Mlama, "Tanzania's Cultural Policy," *Utafiti* 7.1 (1985) and Lihamba, "Politics and Theatre in Tanzania after the Arusha Declaration," ch. 5.

⁶ These ministries are as follows:

1962–63	Ministry of Culture
1964–67	Ministry of Community Development
1968–69	Ministry of Regional Administration and Rural Development
1969–73	Ministry of National Education
1974–79	Ministry of Culture
1980–84	Ministry of Information
1984–85	Prime Minister's Office
1985–89	Ministry of Social Development, Culture, Youth and Sports
1989–Present	Ministry of Labour, Cultural and Social Welfare.

⁷ See Lihamba, "Politics and Theatre," 364.

⁸ See Lihamba, "Politics and Theatre," 362.

of dance, acrobatics and theatre were disbanded in 1980. I have been given various reasons for this decision. Mr Burayani of the Bagamoyo College of Arts told me that it was simply because, although the troupes were meant to inspire others, by the end of the Seventies funding had been cut back to such a degree that they were unable to fulfil this function.⁹ Mr Kaduma of the Ministry of Culture, however, told me that the mass of the people were awed by the professionals' abilities and it was felt that this put them off performing themselves.¹⁰ Finally, in direct contradiction of this view, Elias Songoyi claims that the *ngoma* troupe, at least, failed because the peasantry knew the dances better than the professionals, and the government had failed to see that it was not the masses but the élite who had lost their culture and needed to find it again.¹¹ Such confusion regarding basic reasons for a major cultural decision seems to reinforce the notion that the Ministry of Culture lacks an overall cultural policy. It is necessary, however, to consider here the fact that 1980 also saw a major new development with the launching of the Cultural Programme, and this may have been felt to supersede the need for national cultural troupes.

The Cultural Programme had the declared objective of involving a greatly increased number of people in performance activities (a policy which possibly ignored the fact that the vast majority of the populace were already participating in traditional *ngoma*, song and dance, and many also had access to *kwaya* and modern popular music). The state planned to increase its involvement in these activities – and to promote modern forms such as *ngonjera* and drama – by sending Cultural Officers to all regions to act as animateurs, and by briefing these officers to involve villagers in a wider net of competition in the arts.

The Cultural Officers provided yet another layer to the ponderous machinery of cultural bureaucracy. Although performance graduates from the Bagamoyo College of Arts are gradually taking over these posts, many of the earlier Cultural Officers had no arts training. Moreover, as Ministry employees they are expected to keep normal office hours. This ties them down to largely administrative functions, and prevents even artistically trained personnel from actively participating in assisting local groups, who have to meet in leisure hours. So much stress has been put on the national arts competitions that many local groups work almost exclusively for these, disregarding community-based performance objectives. While performances I witnessed at the 1989 finals of the National Arts and Language Competition in Dodoma indicated that traditional art-forms are popular, diverse, and have highly accomplished performers throughout the country, drama remains imitative, con-

⁹ Interview with Mr Burayani, Teacher, Bagamoyo College of Arts, May 1988.

¹⁰ Interview with Mr G.Z. Kaduma, Director of Arts and Language, Ministry of Culture, June 1988.

¹¹ Songoyi, "Commercialization," 22–23.

strained within the limits of crude naturalism, and portrays no relevant community issues but only official government policies. Understandably, therefore, it is also of minority concern and commands a minimal following.

Two new national training centres, unparalleled in either of the other countries I have studied, have been established in recent years to complement work in the arts at the University. The College of Theatre Arts was established in 1975 in Dar es Salaam to give a broad-based training in performance skills.¹² Lihamba says the programme was initially poorly planned, with no integration of disciplines, and as a result the college was reorganised in 1981.¹³ It was moved to Bagamoyo and several ex-members of the National Troupes were appointed as staff members as well as graduates of University arts courses. The courses offered are practically oriented, teaching the normal range of Tanzanian performance arts – *ngoma*, traditional and modern music, *kwaya*, acrobatics, mime and drama – to an intake of fifteen Form 4 school-leavers aged between eighteen and twenty-four (see Figs. 15–18). All students study all disciplines, although even here *ngoma* and traditional music are most popular, since students who excel in these arts know they are likely to have the chance to travel abroad, as the college frequently receives invitations to foreign festivals.

Bagamoyo College has attracted considerable interest as one of the few practical performance-arts training centres in Africa, and professionals from both Britain and Sweden have worked there. The most ambitious project of this nature was a collaboration in 1980–82 with the Swedish radical theatre company, “Freiteatern.”¹⁴ The groups worked together over a period of two years, and produced two major improvised pieces, *Tunda* (The Fruit) in collaboration with Amandina Lihamba and *The Challenge and the Gap*. These plays broke with naturalistic conventions to produce some highly physical work exploring the use of folk-tales for *Tunda*, and looking at racial stereotypes and cultural differences in *The Challenge and the Gap*. The collaboration led to tours of Tanzania and various African and European nations. Subsequently Bagamoyo-originated drama has retained something of its commitment to physical, often folk-based drama.

Entry to the college is highly competitive. In 1988 there were three hundred and thirty-six applications for the fifteen places available. However, the centre suffers from a lack of resources. It can only accept new students in two out of every three years, since there is insufficient accommodation for a full programme. The acquisi-

¹² My information on the College of Arts stems mainly from interviews with staff and students in May 1988.

¹³ Lihamba, “Politics and Theatre,” 382.

¹⁴ For further information on this project, see Martha Vestin, *The Challenge: A Report of a Two Year Collaboration Between “The National Drama Troupe of Tanzania” and “Freiteatern” of Sweden* (Tryck: SIOA, 1982).

tion of new materials, instruments, etc is a major difficulty, and until 1990 when the Swedish aid agency SIDA (which also funded the "Freiteatern" project) built the college a rehearsal hall and outdoor theatre, all performance work took place outside on a bare concrete slab. The concept of the Bagamoyo college is exceptional in Africa. It is to be regretted that graduates are so poorly used by the state.

The second cultural training institution requiring consideration here is Butimba College of National Education.¹⁵ Butimba is the only centre in Tanzania which specialises in offering advanced teacher training for secondary-school teachers in the areas of art, music and drama. Theatre training for teachers was first offered in Dar es Salaam in 1971, but the college closed in 1975, to be re-opened on the shores of Lake Victoria in 1979 under the influence of Korean teachers who, according to Lihamba, specialised in a particularly melodramatic form of theatre.¹⁶ All staff are now Tanzanian. The college offers two-year specialist courses, although students minor in a more conventional school subject. Students are all teachers who already have some years work-experience, so they are generally in their late twenties when they arrive at Butimba. Up to twenty students a year are accepted for the drama course, which is practically oriented and draws on mainly improvised work, although scripted plays in both English and Kiswahili are occasionally performed.

As was the case at Bagamoyo, the students I spoke to were strongly committed to their work and saw theatre as possessing a potentially strong educational role in Tanzania. However, all students complained about the way their training was misused by the state. A few teachers go on to the University after they finish at Butimba, and a few are seconded to work as Cultural Officers. Most are posted, with no choice in the matter, by the Ministry of Education to secondary schools or teacher training colleges. Since only a very few schools offer arts as part of the curriculum the teachers frequently end up working only in their minor subjects, and at best running an extra-curricular drama club. Students also complained that the majority of staff in schools, and particularly head teachers, fail to see the value of arts education and dismiss theatre activity as worthless play. The Ministry of Education appears to have no plans to improve understanding of the place of the arts in schools, which rather undermines the purpose of having an arts college in the first place.

What is obvious in both institutions is the lack of senior-level planning of an overall policy for productively employing trained performers. To set up practical training courses and then send graduates to places where they cannot use their skills seems not only grossly wasteful of scarce resources, but also to reinforce doubts that the state has any serious commitment to the dissemination of performance skills on

¹⁵ Most of my information on Butimba College of National Education comes from interviews with staff and students carried out during a visit to the College in October 1989.

¹⁶ Lihamba, "Politics and Theatre," 420.

a mass basis. Although, in an interview in 1988, Mr Kaduma told me that it was government policy to introduce culture as part of the schools' core curriculum, several years later nothing had happened, and, as with so many cultural plans, I feel this one has to be taken extremely lightly.¹⁷

Nowhere in Tanzania does art appear to be more than peripheral to the education curriculum, and performance skills are certainly not generally used as a means of spreading knowledge. Drama remains a minority art which even in colleges is expected to express political conformity. In schools, *ngoma* and *ngonjera* remain the dominant arts. As far as the politicians are concerned, one cannot help arriving at the decision that they like art to offer only uncontentious entertainment. Cultural officers and college students, university lecturers and members of professional cultural troupes have all complained to me about the way government demands their presence at state functions. Nearly always, the demands are for traditional music and dance. These supersede any other commitments and can take up much time. The fact that demands are usually made at short notice and that there is no recompense indicates an underlying contempt for the professionalism of artists. Senior-level interest in the arts is purely entertainment-oriented, and the rhetoric of commitment to community-based, serious or enabling performance must be viewed as mere lip-service.

The University and intellectual drama

By the mid-Seventies foreign influence at the University of Dar es Salaam was being marginalised, as radical-Marxist Western staff were replaced by Tanzanians. In the Theatre Department, the voices of Ebrahim Hussein and Penina Mlama were now the most influential, and from this time on an increasing proportion of production work was carried out in Kiswahili. Most of it was either improvised and scripted by students themselves, or else was the production of the leading coterie of teacher/playwrights. This group of playwrights and critics; Hussein, Mlama, Lihamba and to a lesser degree Mbughuni, followed by their students, such as Emmanuel Mbogo and Elias Songoyi, who subsequently joined the University staff have had a tremendous and possibly disproportionate influence in producing and pronouncing on what is intellectually considered admirable in contemporary Tanzanian performance art. In neither of the other countries I am considering are leading producers of playscripts and critical debate concentrated in any one institution. But in Tanzania nearly all critically acclaimed literary artists are, and have been, based at the University. While it is impossible to pinpoint exactly how important such close working connections are (and these writers are by no means in agreement

¹⁷ Interview with Mr G.Z. Kaduma, June 1988.

regarding many aspects of literary production), the combined prestige of the University theatre writers has made it difficult for outsiders either to get their playscripts considered for publication, or for theatre which does not receive University approval to be considered as anything more than "mere" entertainment.

Given that all these playwrights – with the notable exception of Ebrahim Hussein – claim to be writing with the intention of speaking to a mass, popular audience, it is significant, not to mention a trifle ironic, how small the audience is which actually has a chance to witness performances of the literary playwrights' work. Since funding for university-based tours was cut back from the mid-Seventies as plays became more critical of government, it has become increasingly difficult to see performances of this type of theatre. At the time of writing, student productions can be seen only on campus, and only two university-based theatre groups remain operational. These are the prestigious "Paukwa," made up of many Theatre Department staff plus their associates, mostly graduates of the Department, and a group started by Emmanuel Mbogo, the "University Drama Group," which generally produces his plays and has a mixture of academic and non-academic staff members. Since Mbogo left in 1989 to teach in Kenya it is unclear what the future of the latter group will be. They were commissioned to produce a play by another writer that year, but owing to lack of direction the piece was wordy and stilted and generally acknowledged to be of poor quality.¹⁸

Paukwa was set up in 1978 to work as an ensemble group with a critical socialist political perspective.¹⁹ The group works for up to a year on each production and uses a high degree of improvisational study, although Mlama and Lihamba finally script much of the work and Lihamba is the main director. In line with the majority concerns of the University theatre theorists, Paukwa plays deal with current topics of socio-political debate, such as the exploitation of the poor, corruption, and the position of women in society. Their style has moved away from naturalism towards experimentation, with extensive incorporation of traditional performance forms. Many observers have commented to me on the vitality, wit and dynamism of Paukwa plays under Lihamba's direction. Such is the group's prestige that a review by Richard Mabala of the 1989 production, *Mitumba Ndui* (Second-Hand Smallpox), began by saying: "A new play written by Penina Muhando and performed by Paukwa is now a national event."²⁰ Regrettably, these national events are difficult to witness. Along with everyone else in Tanzania, Paukwa performers in recent years

¹⁸ I saw this play at the 1989 Bagamoyo festival, but the action was so slow that I left before the end.

¹⁹ For further information on Paukwa, see Lihamba, "Politics and Theatre," ch 4, section 6.

²⁰ Richard S. Mabala, "Mitumba Ndui: A Personal View," unpublished review (University of Dar es Salaam, 1989): 1.

have often had to take on multiple jobs in order to earn sufficient money to survive.²¹ Consequently, rehearsal schedules can be difficult to maintain. Since the group rigorously disdain commercialisation and are an object of government suspicion, funding for tours has recently been almost non-existent. The rare Paukwa productions can now seldom be seen off the University campus.

Apart from the work of these groups the performance of literary drama in Tanzania is almost at a standstill. Students study some of the simpler, more conformist early plays by Mlama and Hussein in high school, and most of these playwrights' work has been published. However, the competition structures which govern so much amateur drama in Tanzania either bar or give minimal encouragement to the performance of this type of play. The only example I have found of a commercial company performing a published playscript is a version of Mlama's *Heshima Yangu* (My Honour), which is in the repertoire of "Muungano Cultural Troupe." Although it is true that government has not encouraged the spread of intellectual drama, particularly since the form became more critical of the political establishment, the spectacular neglect of published playscripts suggests that they are not as "popular" as their creators would like to think. I was somewhat astounded, during an interview with Amandina Lihamba, when she claimed that there was no such thing as intellectual drama in Tanzania, but that the work coming out of the University was truly popular.²² Her contention was that the problem lay in getting the plays to the people, but that when this was possible the productions had been shown to have mass-appeal. Although Professor Lihamba has many years' experience in producing theatre, her opinions do not tie in with my own, admittedly limited, consumer-research. To most people I consulted, only Mlama and Hussein were commonly known as playwrights. I was also told that these writers had a major communication problem, in that the language they write in is radically different from "street" Kiswahili, that some words used are unknown to the general populace, and that their whole style is alien, a product of the "*wasomi*" (the intellectuals) entirely distinct from the realities of "*wananchi*" (the people).²³

²¹ Owing to the gross inadequacy of state wages, more and more white-collar workers have been forced to spend time on "*miradi*" (projects) to supplement their income. These may involve a second job or a money-making scheme like chicken- or pig-raising. This "second" economy is now so prevalent that those who work only at their official jobs are the exception rather than the rule. The resulting division of interests tends to mean that the state sector suffers from a lack of employee commitment.

²² Interview with Amandina Lihamba, Dar es Salaam, March 1990.

²³ Defenders of Mlama claim she writes a much more accessible Kiswahili than Ebrahim Hussein. However, this seems to be a matter of degree. Non-intellectuals I spoke with still felt her language was far removed from that in common use.

Lihamba also told me that would-be playwrights are often not so concerned with the acid-test of popular performance as with the literary prestige acquired through publication. This appears to me a further indication of élitist concerns, since only the "*wasomi*" read plays. However, it is undoubtedly difficult to have one's plays performed in any circumstances. Mbogo started his own group simply because it was the only way he could get his work on stage. A further difficulty is that aspiring playwrights in Tanzania have to compete with the tiny group of theatre "greats" for severely limited opportunities to publish or perform. This is a problem in many Third-World countries, where publishers and arts sponsors are extremely hard to find. It would appear that during the first explosion of modern African literature in the Sixties major playwrights such as Hussein, Tsegaye Gebre-Medhin, and Soyinka established reputations which not only overwhelmed those who are now attempting to follow in their footsteps, but also absorbed much of the small amounts of funding available for African publishing. Subsequently, publishers and promoters have tended to continue to support the established, safe "names" for obvious commercial reasons, but this has been at the expense of younger writers.

Given that the intellectual dramatists are so vocal in their criticism of "airport culture," and of the competitive and politically conformist arts promoted by government, while at the same time looking askance at the commercial, entertainment-oriented performances of the professional cultural troupes, it seems important to examine the type of theatre which bears the stamp of academic approval. First, all such theatre is expected to have an educational function, promoting discussion and understanding of currently relevant, national socio-political issues. In recent years the discussion has tended to be based on a critical assessment that the government is not working in the best interests of the masses, and that the people have to look for ways of liberating themselves from state oppression within a socialist context. Penina Mlama exemplifies this type of theatre at its most didactic. Although Mlama does incorporate folk elements in much of her work to a considerable degree, the social message is never allowed to be obscured by individualistic or entertainment considerations. Mlama believes she has a duty to educate which overrides aesthetic considerations. In an interview in 1981 she explained:

I think when I do my writing I want to pick any problem which is troubling the people of Tanzania at the present time. I see myself as having a duty to try to help the society in either showing where problems are, or trying to suggest solutions to the problems.²⁴

This prescriptive approach to drama has had a strong appeal within the context of *ujamaa*ist African socialism, and Mlama's plays have been performed more often than those of any other Tanzanian dramatist. However, there is a noticeable differ-

²⁴ Mlama, interviewed by F.E.M.K. Senkoro in 1981, as quoted in his article, "Penina Muhando: A Contemporary Tanzanian Female Writer," unpublished (1988).

ence between her early work and the plays of the Eighties which have often been the result of collaboration with Paukwa. The more recent plays are confrontational in their attitude to government, and have moved further from pure socialist dogmatism as the Paukwa metaphoric and folk-oriented performance style has exerted its influence. Mlama has won considerable critical acclaim, but to an outsider her didacticism can seem a trifle forbidding. Laughter and comedy are equated in the Mlama canon, as they are for several other influential writers, with evils of colonially oppressive *vichekesho* and consequently have little or no place in her work. Indeed, comedy is unfortunately equated with trivialisation in most Tanzanian intellectual drama. The notion that laughter can be a powerful tool of criticism appears to have gained little acceptance.

Although Mlama is possibly the most extreme of the University playwrights, a similar didacticism can be seen in plays such as Muhanika's *Njia Panda* (Crossroads; Dar es Salaam, 1981), Mbogo's *Kilio Kisimani* (The Cry at the Well; unpublished, 1979) and Bagamoyo's *Tunda* (unpublished, 1981) and *Chakutu* (Rusty; unpublished, 1983/84). The major exception to the prescriptive/didactic tendency in Tanzanian intellectual drama is the work of Ebrahim Hussein.

From a position of early commitment to Marxism, Hussein has moved further and further towards an aesthetic, individualist approach to theatre. His early work is constantly on school curricula and has been the subject of much critical discourse, but the later "difficult" plays, with their open-ended, heavily metaphoric style and absence of overt political concerns, are seen as particularly élitist. Hussein is the only playwright who has openly broken with the myth that all Tanzanian writers produce for the masses. Although many complain that his style is too obscure, Hussein claims that he cannot write in any other way and that in any case "the goal is artistic expression, not political truth."²⁵

Robert Philipson, who has carried out the most detailed examination of Hussein's work to date in his doctoral dissertation, "Drama and National Culture: A Marxist Study of Ebrahim Hussein," complains that critical interpretation of Hussein's work has suffered from being forced to conform with the dominant mode of didactic, African-nationalist criticism rather than accepting the playwright on his own terms.²⁶ Certainly, although even the more recent plays do contain socio-political comment; on the nature of independence and the corrupting nature of materialism in *Mashetani* (Devils), on the nature and problems of leadership in *Jogoo Kijijini* (The Cock in the Village) and *Ngao ya Jadi* (The Traditional Shield), and on contemporary political problems and the position of women in *Harusi ya Kakake*

²⁵ Quoted in Robert Philipson, "Drama and National Culture: A Marxist Study of Ebrahim Hussein," 243.

²⁶ Philipson "Drama and National Culture," 232.

Kahinja (The Wedding of Kakake Kahinja), this is only one strand in the playwright's work.²⁷ Hussein's heritage as a Muslim Mswahili is a powerful influence, leading him constantly to examine the stresses involved in trying to reconcile tradition and innovation. The Mswahili background is also a factor which strongly affects Hussein's poetic, metaphoric style. Finally, the search of the individual for self-realisation is central to all the plays.

These latter factors pose considerable problems for a critical establishment which cannot deny Hussein's literary and poetic talent, but cannot place a definite utilitarian value on such avowedly individualistic productions. The later, more complicated plays have received little critical analysis and few performances. Indeed, after *Kinjeketile* none of the plays has seen more than one production, and *Arusi* has never been performed.²⁸ Hussein's alienation from the mainstream of artistic development is reflected in the fact that he has left the University and keeps increasingly to himself, declining to comment on or explain his work.

The final writer to be mentioned here is Euphrase Kezilahabi, whose 1979 play *Kaputula la Marx* (The Shorts of Marx) broke new ground among academic playwrights because of the high degree of absurdist satire applied to criticise the government. Kezilahabi is better known as one of Tanzania's foremost novelists, and his work is heavily socialist. *Kaputula la Marx* fits into the dominant mode of socialist, ideologically critical writing exemplified by Penina Mlama, but the play introduces a welcome vein of humour into intellectual drama. Through ridicule and satire, this piece, far more openly than most, "tries to show that *Ujamaa* cannot work because as an ideology it is too idealistic and incoherent."²⁹ The only problem is that the frankness of Kezilahabi's criticism means that his play has never been published or performed.

²⁷ *Mashetani* (Devils; Dar es Salaam: Oxford UP, 1980); *Jogoo Kijijini* (The Cock in the Village; Nairobi: Oxford UP, 1976); *Ngao ya Jadi* (The Traditional Shield; Nairobi: Oxford UP, 1976); *Arusi* (The Wedding; Nairobi: Oxford UP, 1980).

²⁸ Philipson did research into the number of times Hussein's plays have been performed. Although the number of credits is second only to Muhando-Mlama's, the following list shows how few are the performances of any intellectual drama in Tanzania:

<i>Wakati Ukuta</i>	1968	Jangwani Girls' School
<i>Alikiona</i>	1968	Agakhan Drama Club
<i>Kinjeketile</i>	1969-70	University of Dar es Salaam
	1974-75	University of Dar es Salaam
	1977	National Drama Troupe
<i>Jogoo Kijijini & Ngao ya Jadi</i>	1976	University of Dar es Salaam
<i>Mashetani</i>	1977-78	University of Dar es Salaam
<i>Sokomoko</i>	1981-82	University of Dar es Salaam.

²⁹ Lihamba, "Politics and Theatre," 332.

In situations such as this we see evidence of the high level of self-censorship operating in Tanzanian theatre. Theoretically the state has wide-ranging powers to censor written material, and all new plays are supposed to be passed by the censorship board. In practice, the board is seldom approached, and even more rarely bans material. However, schools and colleges are unlikely to produce contentious plays which will win neither official favour nor competitions. Even at the University, the metaphoric approach taken in recent critical drama appears to result in material which is sufficiently elusive for the censorship board to ignore its underlying condemnation of government policies. What is interesting is that since the late Eighties there has been a rise in the independent, often critical press, which is being allowed to develop freely. If only theatre could become more independent of state sponsorship, and a little more courageous, there seems to be no reason why it too should not now feel more at liberty to express a wide range of political opinions.

The final area I wish to consider in relation to university-originated theatre is the move in the early Eighties away from taking theatre out to the people and towards what Lihamba and Mlama call "Theatre for Social Development" or "Popular Theatre." Mlama is a leading international voice in the popular theatre movement, which builds on the ideas of Freire and Augusto Boal to promote community-based theatre. The concept is that, instead of taking plays which impose elitist values on tours of the countryside, skilled facilitators will work with community groups to create pieces of theatre which incorporate traditional cultural forms and promote critical analysis of community problems. Popular theatre aims to work at the interface of political, cultural and development concerns with those who are defined as the oppressed.

The core of Mlama's book *Culture and Development* is a series of accounts of four communities in Tanzania with whom she led popular theatre workshops. Not all of these were associated with the University. The colleges at Bagamoyo and Butimba have also taken up the concept, but the ideas behind the movement were pioneered within Tanzania at the University, particularly by the two women professors. Mlama has arrived at a position where she argues that "the challenge of development strategies in the developing countries lies not in the integration of any culture, but rather in the integration of the culture of the dominated classes."³⁰ Consequently, a bottom-up strategy is espoused. Facilitators go into interested communities and discuss and evaluate community concerns. In Tanzania the most common worries seem to be youth alienation, which leads to frequent teenage pregnancies, unwillingness to work on the land, and petty crime. There are also many difficulties

³⁰ For further information on theatre for social development in Tanzania see Lihamba, "Politics and Theatre," ch. 6.

with local party leadership, which is often seen as corrupt and unconcerned with helping the peasantry develop either basic services or economic power.

Once the areas of concern have been established, members of the community work in groups improvising dances, music and skits to illustrate their problems. Performances are then given, followed by discussion designed to produce strategies for improving the local situation.

Certainly in some cases Mlama is able to list material changes which were made as a result of new understandings promoted by the plays created. In the village of Malya, where workshops were conducted between 1982 and 1984, youth employment schemes were initiated and corrupt bureaucratic practices exposed. In Mkambalani, the subject of a 1986 workshop, the village was finally enabled to gain the crucial official registration which is necessary before the state will consider installing any basic services such as schools and health clinics. However, in this case the presence of eminent academics highlighting injustice and involving University legal experts seems to have been more influential than raised community awareness.

The value of these projects should not, of course, be seen purely in terms of material end-results. The giving of a voice and the valuing of indigenous cultural forms may be quite as important as any particular programme of action. There are enormous problems of funding in Tanzania which have made popular theatre workshops only sporadic affairs. But it must be significant that no lasting community-theatre movement seems to be developing as a result of the academics' initiatives.

Mlama omits to mention that after the official Malya programme ended some villagers proceeded to commercialise their new skills by creating comic plays to take on tour. Lihamba says these plays betrayed the analytical approach of the theatre of social development and failed in educational objectives. Indeed, it appears that the new drama fell prey to the *vichekesho* style picked up from commercial cultural troupes (cf Figs. 19–20). Although Lihamba acknowledges that there is a danger of "experts" imposing their views of suitable theatre on the people, she cannot conceal her university-inculcated horror at the commercialisation of this project.

The popular theatre projects seem to indicate that people are interested in community theatre but have insufficient self-confidence to carry on working in the same vein once the dominant influence of the "experts" has gone. Why this should be so different from the case in Zimbabwe is difficult to pinpoint. However, I suspect radically different attitudes to commercial utilisation of the arts are at least one important factor. In Zimbabwe, ZIMFEP promoted community-based theatre as a possible source of income generation from the outset, and did not see this as incompatible with producing relevant issue-based drama. In Tanzania the attitude of the academics has been that making money from art is a form of cultural prostitution to be automatically equated with meaningless entertainment. Such outright condemnation tends to work against the building up of worthwhile professional art and possi-

bly becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. Moreover, both distrust of independent innovation and long-standing acceptance by the masses of a party-imposed status quo (discussed at the beginning of this section) militate against the success of new, peasant-led, drama projects. Most Tanzanians have become so used to being "given" wisdom by the party that, even if they begin to distrust certain manifestations of state power, they are reluctant to initiate possibly contentious projects, especially if those projects offer no prospect of much-needed financial benefit.

One cannot doubt the sincerity of many of the university theatre practitioners, or their zeal in promoting useful, educative drama. However, the rarefied atmosphere in which the academics live, on what is fittingly known as "The Hill,"³¹ does seem to have led to attitudes which are possibly as divorced from the people's realities as those of the government, whom the intelligentsia so harshly criticise but who share an élite background which distances both groups from the majority of the people. Unless Tanzanian intellectuals abandon the pretence that they are the same as the peasantry, and acknowledge the incompatibility of a bourgeois group attempting to produce proletarian or peasant culture, I cannot see how they can increase their relevance to contemporary Tanzanian art. At present, university dramatic output is at an all-time low; apart from the Paukwa-originated plays, what there is generally counts as literature rather than as performance art. Financial difficulties are undoubtedly an important factor behind the dropping-off of such theatre activity, but even substantial financial input would be of limited value unless accompanied by a reassessment of the role of the cultural élite in Tanzanian society.

*Popular performance art and cultural troupes*³²

In looking at popular performance art it is necessary in many parts of Africa, and certainly in Tanzania, to differentiate between urban and rural contexts. Although research is patchy, it is evident that throughout rural Tanzania traditional *ngoma* continues to be used, not only in schools and for competitions but as part of the fabric of day-to-day living. Birth, marriage, death and similar rites of passage are still widely marked by communal dance and music, often interwoven with Christian or Muslim ceremonial. I have been able to find little information on contemporary developments in traditional performance forms within rural settings, but Songoyi does give one interesting example of how *ngomas* continue to be

³¹ Dar es Salaam University is perched on a hill several kilometres outside the centre of the city, and is commonly referred to as "The Hill," a designation which reflects the campus's isolation from ordinary people.

³² Information in this section is largely based on my own observations. However, the dissertations of Songoyi and Chiwanga Muluwa have been of considerable use, and I am most grateful for the fund of information supplied by Mark Plane.

adapted to reflect new events. Discussing the “*Bugobogobo*” dance, which traditionally portrayed the events of the agricultural year, he speaks of how, following the war with Uganda, the scene showing defence of the crops developed in the Mwanza Region village of Ngwashepi into a commentary on the war. A new song was composed describing how the Tanzanians would beat Amin, incorporating the national event into local legend:

Amini, the uncivilized had boasted too much
That he was the conqueror of the British Empire.
The beating he got was big enough.
Amini cried “Men help me.” He panicked.
Tanzania has now fired its artillery
Eighty kilometers inside Uganda
Kambarage³³ said: “Be cool Amini, cool
These are just light rains, heavy ones are coming.”
Let us beat him thoroughly
Carry him, like a snake, in our finger tips.
Let us throw him away
Lest he smell bad to us.
Amini is mad. Heavy rains are falling.³⁴

Although this is an isolated example, I cannot believe it is unique. As I demonstrated in earlier chapters, traditional cultures are never static, and the Tanzanian peasantry have given ample proof of their ability to adapt cultural innovations and political events within the context of existing performance forms. What is notable is the difference between the vitality of this song, which reflects great pride in and identification with the war, and the generality of jingoistic slogan songs produced for mass consumption by state-influenced commercial troupes.

Urban popular culture has in recent years been the target of far more attention than the evolution of rural cultural forms, largely because the former has come under considerable suspicion from both the state and the intellectual community. This suspicion derives partly from a deep-rooted distrust of the corrupting nature of urban life. This is something which is evident in all the cultures I have examined, but it is particularly strong in Tanzania, where the philosophy of *ujamaa* so closely linked virtue with the rural peasantry and the evils of capitalism and moral collapse with the city. Urban cultural life is multi-faceted. Traditional forms and rituals co-exist with acrobats, pop groups, film and the activities of commercial cultural troupes. It is, however, the modern, live entertainers who have given rise to most

³³ Kambarage is the second name of Julius Kambarage Nyerere. The use of an indigenous rather than Christian name demonstrates the rural community embracing Nyerere as one of their own. The metaphors about rain and snakes are taken from a broadcast speech by the President explaining why he declared war on Amin.

³⁴ Songoyi, “Commercialization,” 55 (tr. Songoyi).

controversy. Most bands and performance troupes were formed in the post-independence period, in conjunction with state-run enterprises, specifically to promote *ujamaa*. Even now, many claim they actively support state and party through their work. When Songoyi interviewed one Mr Shomari, the manager of "Sungura Textile Utamaduni Troupe," in 1983, the objectives of the troupe were still given as the promotion of culture, entertainment, advertising the patronising organisation, and promotion of the party and government.³⁵ Certainly the mass of music and performance art on offer still follows the party line. As Mlama explains,

the context of most poems, songs (choir, *ngoma* and pop songs) is oriented towards praising of either Government and Party leaders or Government policies, decrees and campaigns. This tendency has given rise to puppet art which largely parrots what the leaders are saying [...] These songs [...] display no artistic treatment of the content. Nor do they feature any views or analysis or interpretation of the subjects expressed.³⁶

As the result of a study of one hundred and eighty-six such songs, Miti and Kahamba further concluded that "the most common and striking feature of political songs in Tanzania is their direct echoing of leadership speeches and writings. There is virtually no originality in the songs."³⁷

While this parroting of party policies is a major source of intellectual disapproval of urban music, it is understandably what the state values. What the state and intellectuals are united in is their distrust of the commercialisation of popular art and the immorality it is supposed to encourage. Commercialisation of bands and cultural troupes was a creeping phenomenon of the Seventies and Eighties. Managers and performers realised that a living could be made by professional performing companies. Gradually these companies became more and more independent of their parent bodies. As competition grew for audiences, so did demands on performers. Talent scouts searched for singers, musicians, acrobats and actors of professional standard, and groups vied for the most talented performers, offering financial incentives to local stars to move from one troupe to another.

The government distrusts these developments because of the possible levels of immorality it believes such art can promote. Certainly, commercial considerations appear to have led to a heightening of explicitly sexual elements in the re-creation of some traditional dances. This development is undoubtedly as popular with audience as it is loudly condemned by the élite (who frequently play a public role of moral watchdog which their private lives may blatantly contradict). Tied in with this condemnation is the fact that commercial performers commonly appear at beer halls,

³⁵ Songoyi, "Commercialization," 29–30.

³⁶ Penina Mlama, "Tanzania's Cultural Policy," 14.

³⁷ K. Miti & H. Kahamba, "Music and the Reproduction of State Ideology in Tanzania," unpublished paper, University of Dar es Salaam, 1982.

where alcohol and prostitutes are available. Not only is this phenomenon by no means exclusive to Tanzania, but drunkenness and sexual activity are also in abundant evidence at the more expensive hotels where the élite go for entertainment. The problem is fundamentally one of ideological puritanism versus popular demand for entertainment. Since the state has demonstrated its unwillingness to provide cultural venues or training for commercial artists to explore performance techniques which go beyond the lowest common denominator in appealing to slapstick humour and sexual titillation, it is in a weak position to complain.

The confusing of moral and political issues seems particularly common in Tanzania, where the whole ethos of *ujamaa* was related to ideas of self-sacrifice and moral excellence. However, the blurring of the line between personal morality and political ideology does not seem to me particularly helpful and may lead to unwonted intrusion into individual liberties. In the case of the criticism of commercial entertainers, complaints on a moral level are a matter of looking at effects, rather than at the causes which make people seek oblivion rather than enlightenment in their choice of entertainment.

I think some of the criticism of commercialisation itself is also related to moral confusion. There is an element in both state and intellectual socialism in Tanzania which sees the acquisition of wealth as intrinsically evil. There is also considerable intellectual snobbery about what constitutes a suitable venue for the presentation of culture. When I have suggested to academic artists that they should try performing in beer halls to see if they can really hold a popular audience, the reaction has generally been one of horror that they should go to such "low" places where there might be drunks and an audience in search of entertainment rather than art. Yet, in Zimbabwe, community-based companies have frequently performed with and without payment in beer halls. The preciousness of the intellectual élite's attitude towards commercial art seems to me to deny performers' right to generate income in order to support professional artistic activity in Tanzania. Since the state cannot or will not provide funding for viable urban alternatives, the logical extension of this rejection of professionalism is that the élite would prefer to retain their moral purity, even if this means the complete extinction of art, rather than run the risk of pollution by commercialised entertainment.

Ultimately, the state is pragmatic enough to accept audience demand for jazz bands and cultural troupes. There have also been some tentative moves by the University and the Arts Council to get intellectuals and popular performers to work together, although these have been sporadic and have only had a low level of impact on the work of the professional performers.

Regarding the issue of entertainment versus educational art, many professional performers do have a serious side to their art. Bands perform songs that discuss issues such as corruption, poverty and, more recently, Aids awareness, alongside

love songs and party propaganda. In recent years there has been a small but growing trend towards songs which express a degree of criticism of the state, although these can only be heard live or on bootleg tapes, as Radio Tanzania refuses to broadcast material critical of the government.

Competition between the cultural troupes is intense. Several of the early troupes have ceased to function because they could not compete in an atmosphere of audience demands for increasing sophistication of acrobats, singers and actors. A notable recent development has been the emergence of a new private troupe called "Mandela," which is highly popular and is led by a graduate of the Bagamoyo College of Arts. Perhaps this is a sign that some of the "*wasomi*" are beginning to consider working from within rather than remaining isolated, inactive and frustrated in their artistic purity.

The cultural troupes of Tanzania perform six days a week, sometimes twice a day, moving round a circuit of beer halls. Performances are advertised in the national Kiswahili newspaper, and a popular troupe like "Muungano" can expect to have several hundred people packed into each venue, especially at weekends. Performances are generally in the round or with the audience on at least three sides of a pit-like stage area. A typical show will last around four hours, from late afternoon into the evening. The programme invariably starts with an *ngoma* and then follows a variety format including acrobatics, *kwaya*, *taraab*, *vichekesho* sketches, more *ngoma*, and jazz music, generally ending up with a play which can last anything from half an hour to an hour and a half. Each troupe contains up to thirty artists, many of whom may double up, performing in several disciplines.

Performers are often recruited by talent scouts who go out into rural areas looking for young dancers. Female dancers are paid the least in a profession where no wages are high. Although Tanzania has a minimum wage of 2,600 shillings per month (approximately US\$15) it is not uncommon for novice dancers to receive less than the legal minimum. The companies also impose considerable discipline on young women, who may be forbidden to marry or become pregnant for a number of years after joining a troupe. At higher levels there is considerable competition amongst managers for the services of popular *taraab* singers or acrobats. Acrobats are the aristocrats of the variety world. They can earn up to five or six thousand shillings as a basic wage, and may also work as solo artists in up-market hotels and restaurants around Dar es Salaam.

To see these troupes, the audience pay up to one hundred shillings each, and the gate money is split between the host bar and the troupe manager, who is often fairly wealthy. Such an entry fee precludes attendance by the poor. Audiences are petit-bourgeois and at weekends may include whole families. They come primarily for entertainment, but audiences are not indiscriminating, and there is something of a league table of cultural troupes. The premiere troupe is

undoubtedly Muungano. An important factor in Muungano's drawing-power is that it produces the most serious drama of all the groups. In most companies, drama consists primarily of *vichekesho* skits, relying on crude slapstick humour of an extremely obvious kind. Muungano, by contrast, uses no skits but produces a fairly long play at the end of its daily programme.

Most cultural troupes perform from scenarios around which their *vichekesho* is improvised. Muungano, however, employ script-writers, who take their social duties as playwrights extremely seriously.³⁸ Because the troupes perform in a limited number of venues there is a constant demand for new plays, although these are often variations on a limited number of themes.³⁹ The sexual causes of domestic distress are common topics for these plays. The sins of "sugar daddies," and even, sometimes, sugar mummies are condemned, as is extra-marital sex in general. Several plays feature a man's evil past coming back to haunt him in the form of grown-up illegitimate children. Finally, the playboy who gets into farcical trouble because of the number of his girlfriends is a common figure of social comedy.

On the broader social level the evils and problems related to urban poverty are a widespread source of drama. Ever since the government announced an official anti-corruption campaign in 1988, plays condemning profiteers have proliferated. However, it is notable that such plays never criticise the state at a more than a petty level. The leader of a ten-house cell⁴⁰ may be exposed as corrupt, but an M.P. would never be so accused. Urban popular drama relates almost exclusively to the day-to-day problems and experiences of the petit bourgeoisie, usually in plays laced with plentiful action and considerable doses of comedy. Mark Plane, who has carried out the most detailed research to date among audiences at these plays, told me that respondents often said they attended Muungano performances specifically because of the high standard of acting and the social relevance of the plays. This response would seem to undermine many of the criticisms of the intellectuals. Drama as performed by the cultural troupes undoubtedly lacks sophistication. It betrays substantial foreign influences, with some playwrights admitting that they adapt plots from Western and Indian films showing in town. Actors themselves recognise that their technique is often rudimentary. Pressure to perform means that rehearsals are minimal, and when actors also have to rehearse dance and song it is hardly surprising that acting skills are lower than might be desirable.

³⁸ Information from Mark Plane, who interviewed Muungano's scriptwriter, Jayson Kami, a graduate in urban and rural planning from the prestigious Ardhi Institute, now working for the National Land Use Commission, who certainly sees his writing as serious social commentary.

³⁹ Information from Mark Plane, and Lihamba, "Politics and Theatre," ch. 4 and Appendix B, plus my own observations of the drama performed by cultural troupes.

⁴⁰ The lowest sub-section of party organisation. All households were grouped together in such cells.

One can see considerable parallels here between early Ethiopian popular theatre/*kinet* variety shows and the work of Tanzanian cultural troupes. In both countries variety seems to be an indigenously achieved means of beginning to popularise drama and build up an urban theatre-going public. Unfortunately, in both countries this process entails considerable hardship and exploitation of under-regarded performers. Accurate income figures are impossible to acquire, but managers display signs of considerable affluence while the mass of performers earn only a bare living. There are also parallels to be drawn between the snobbery displayed by upper-class intellectuals in both countries towards entertainment-based popular culture. At least in Ethiopia, however, the class issues were never so disguised by ideological flummery as has been the case in Tanzania.

Contemporary Tanzania displays four distinct strands of cultural activity: traditional performance arts; state-sponsored party-oriented theatre; intellectual drama; and the variety shows of the urban cultural troupes. Regrettably, cooperation between these groups, or even acknowledgement of their mutual validity, is often minimal. Moreover, the unacknowledged confusion between ideological and class-based disagreement over the function of art in Tanzania only muddies the waters of debate further. After the dynamism which produced a high level of research and theoretical analysis of African performance art following the Arusha declaration, it is saddening that intellectual theatre practitioners have been unable to apply their experience in recent years to help build a more relevant mass popular culture, and that the state has been so reluctant to help performers to take a real part in any debate on the development of the nation.

ETHIOPIA

A government in crisis

Throughout the Eighties, political life in Ethiopia was increasingly dominated by two factors, famine and civil war. The combination crippled the economy. Famine broke out in 1982 in the over-populated and eroded highlands of northern Ethiopia, but came to widespread national and international notice only in the autumn of 1984, by which time a third of the national population are estimated to have been seriously affected. Since that time the spectre of hunger has never left northern Ethiopia. The situation was exacerbated by civil war, which raged in Eritrea and Tigray until the overthrow of President Mengistu's government in May 1991. The statutory response of the President to these crises was to centralise power ever further, to deny any suggestion of negotiation with dissident opinion and to ruthlessly crush internal opposi-

tion. After he seized power in 1977, Mengistu Haile-Mariam became an increasingly absolute ruler, and the pretence that he led a democratic state wore ever thinner.

Centralisation was implemented through a range of policies. The government steadily increased its control over *kebelles* and Peasant's Associations, while the people were dragooned into mass organisations such as the Revolutionary Ethiopian Youth Association (REYA) and the Revolutionary Ethiopian Womens' Association (REWA). The policy that most radically affected the mass of Ethiopians and that was most widely resented, however, was the villagisation programme, which was implemented with considerable use of force in the mid-Eighties. Given the Tanzanian experience of villagisation, the government might have been expected to realise the scale of the problems and the resentment felt by rural populations forced on to ill-prepared village sites. The programme was clothed in rhetoric about how villages could provide enhanced services for the people, but was widely recognised to be a means of facilitating ease of control over the peasantry. Ultimately, state power was enforced by the largest army in black Africa, a largely conscripted force over three hundred thousand strong.⁴¹

Until the crisis in Soviet socialism, the Ethiopian government owed much to the support of the USSR. Allegiance to the ideals of Marxism-Leninism was loudly proclaimed, and elaborate preparations were made for the creation of a Marxist party, which finally came into being in September 1984 as the Worker's Party of Ethiopia. Even then, it took a further three years for a new constitution to be promulgated and an official transfer of power to be effected from the military PMAC to the civilian People's Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (PDRE). The constitution made provision for a wide range of civil rights, but few in Ethiopia were under any illusion that Mengistu had any intention of relinquishing the reins of power. To question the state in the Eighties was as dangerous as it had been at any time in Ethiopia's autocratic history.

The credibility of Mengistu's government as a reforming socialist force rapidly eroded in the late Eighties. Former party activists began distancing themselves from the PDRE. In marked contrast to the position in the first half of the decade, by 1990 criticism of the government was being freely voiced in public places (although the media were still rigidly controlled by the state). In Addis Ababa, discontent rarely flared into open protest. Memories of the Red Terror were vivid amongst the urban population, which had been cowed and remained largely quiescent, although from 1989 onwards students at Addis Ababa University began a series of demonstrations against the government. Several attempts from within the Dergue and the military

⁴¹ This was the figure estimated by Clapham in 1988. I have no more recent figures, but extensive drafts continued to be called up for military service until the end of the war.

establishment on the life of the President were dealt with by executions, sometimes carried out by Mengistu himself.

After the withdrawal of the massive Soviet aid which had maintained Mengistu's army until 1989, the military suffered a succession of defeats by rebel forces. In early 1990 Mengistu publicly renounced the doctrines of Marxism–Leninism in a bid to win military support from the West. This abrupt about-face, combined with continuing autocratic rule, exposed the ideological bankruptcy of the leadership and the naked desire of the President to retain power at all costs.

A new beginning?

In May 1991 demoralised government forces finally admitted defeat. In Eritrea, the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) entered the capital city of Asmara, and under Issayas Aferworki assumed de-facto control over the territory. Meanwhile the EPLF's co-revolutionaries, the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), waited on the outskirts of Addis Ababa. On May 21, Mengistu Haile Mariam fled Ethiopia to join his family in Zimbabwe. Mengistu's army had no further will to resist, and on May 28 a cobbled-together caretaker government fell to the liberation forces, which walked into Addis Ababa watched by silent crowds of frightened citizens.

The EPRDF was largely a Tigrayan force which had, in the previous two years, won a succession of victories in northern Ethiopia. After liberating the Tigray region, the highly disciplined guerrilla force fought its way through the Amhara heartlands of Gondar, Dessie and Shoa, to gain the final prize of Addis Ababa. In July 1991, Meles Zenawi, chairman of the EPRDF, established the Transitional Government of Ethiopia (TGE), promising to reform the political structure of Ethiopia and institute democratic rule.

Establishing democracy in Ethiopia was never going to be easy. The disparate peoples who make up the state have no experience of working with each other. Moreover, the economy was in ruins and persistent famine had for a decade dogged the lives of many throughout the country.

One quickly apparent benefit of peace and the new régime was that freedom of speech became possible. A host of new political parties came into being, and many magazines and newspapers appeared to discuss every aspect of political, social and economic life. The theatres were slower to respond to new freedoms than the press, but here too new songs and plays were to emerge to criticise the old régime and question the new.

When they came to power both the EPLF and the EPRDF promised democratic elections within two years. In Eritrea a referendum in April 1993 monitored by the United Nations delivered the unsurprising result that ninety-nine percent of the

people wished for independence to become a formal as well as an actual reality. The EPLF now has to create democratic political structures within Eritrea. Some observers doubt the ease with which a highly disciplined military organisation will manage the transition. There have been riots by guerrilla fighters tired of living in barracks and working for pocket-money two years after liberation has been won. Ethnic and religious differences are also potential sources of strife, with mutual animosities deeply rooted in Eritrean history. However, at the time of writing Eritrea is enjoying a honeymoon period, constituted as an independent state for the first time ever after fighting Africa's longest guerrilla war. The people are buoyant, optimistic and tremendously dedicated to the self-help ethos of the EPLF in seeking to rebuild a devastated land. The government has a fund of goodwill which must help enormously in creating a new Eritrea.

Ethiopia faces many of the same economic and infrastructural problems as Eritrea. However, the government has also to win the trust of a nation which is suspicious of Tigrayan hegemonic ambitions and deeply divided over how best to rebuild Ethiopia. The EPRDF decided to construct a democratic state based on the idea of national self-determination. What this has led to is ethnic politics, which threaten to tear the country apart and start a new civil war, this time in the southern regions. Early attempts to create a government with representation for the different ethnic peoples of Ethiopia quickly ran into trouble when the important Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) withdrew from the transitional government, claiming that their views were not being taken into account. In the run-up to the June 1993 district and regional elections it appears that surrogate government ethnic parties squeezed out genuine nationalist groupings, and there have been many accusations of strong-arm electioneering tactics by the state, which make the status of the new governing councils highly dubious.

Initially, the new government did seem committed to decentralisation of power, and carefully avoided appearing vengeful, with humane treatment of senior officials who had been rounded up in the aftermath of Mengistu's overthrow. In many areas, including the places I know best, such as the Ministry of Culture and the theatre houses, steps were taken to devolve power and move towards more democratic organisational procedures. The always politically important University of Addis Ababa was promised full autonomy. Regrettably, 1993 saw a gradual retreat from these liberal positions. Not only are there very serious allegations of rigged elections, but all those who had belonged to the Worker's Party of Ethiopia, numbering over a million, were summarily disenfranchised. The highly suspicious Amhara population, smarting from a perceived defeat by their millennium-old rivals for power, the Tigrayans, and resentful of the loss of Eritrea, were just beginning to see some good in the new régime when the liberalisation programme went into reverse. During 1993 many middle-ranking,

unpolitical Amhara have lost government jobs to Tigrayans, while a furore broke out at Addis Ababa University in April 1993 when forty of the most senior academics were dismissed without notice or explanation.

It is impossible to know why or how far Meles Zenawi will backtrack on his early commitment to create a genuine democracy. The Tigrayans, in their fairly unitary northern region, do not appear to have fully appreciated the intricate and volatile ethnic weave of southern Ethiopia. Used to military discipline, they have obviously not found the transfer to democratic negotiation easy. Moreover, the Tigrayans undoubtedly saw their struggle as not only the pursuit of ethnic freedom but as a liberation of the whole of Ethiopia from an intolerable dictatorship. The suspicion with which they were greeted by many whom they "liberated" must be galling. None of this excuses some very high-handed and at times unsavoury actions in the past couple of years. Freedom of speech and some decentralising policies are still in place, but the political future of Ethiopia must be a matter of concern.

In the analysis of recent Ethiopian theatre which follows I will draw a line between the policies carried forward in the last years of Dergue rule and new directions emerging under the transitional government. However, Ethiopia is an extremely volatile nation at the time of writing, and it would be rash to make any firm predictions as to how cultural policy will be shaped in the coming years.

*The Theatre Arts Department*⁴²

Until the overthrow of Mengistu's government brought new possibilities for freedom of expression in all areas of Ethiopian life, the only radical changes in the style and scope of recent Ethiopian drama had resulted from the activities of the Theatre Arts Department of Addis Ababa University. I have spoken in previous chapters of various attempts to set up training facilities in Ethiopia for performance artists. The most recent had been Tsegaye Gebre-Medhin's practical training school at the National Theatre, but this never won state backing and received no continued support from its founder. Indeed, after the start-up funds ran out, courses could continue only by employing students in the theatre as part-time actors, who, when they graduated, had to be absorbed into the main acting company. Consequently there was general relief when the new Ras Theatre employed many course-graduates, and the school was closed in 1978.

It was that same year that the University Theatre Arts Department came into being. As was the case with the Ras Theatre, the decision to open the new depart-

⁴² My information on the Theatre Arts Department comes from my own experiences of working there between 1984 and 1986, as well as from repeated visits in the following years. I have also drawn on extensive interviews with past and present staff members. For more detailed information on the Department, see my "Ethiopia: The Creation of a Theatre Culture," ch. 6-7.

ment seems to have been more in the nature of a reward to a government supporter than the result of planned cultural policy. In the case of the Theatre Arts Department the recipient of the gift was Hailu Araaya, who was then Dean of the University's Institute of Language Studies (ILS), and who wished to expand his domain. As one might expect, Tsegaye Gebre-Medhin was also closely involved in the planning of the project and was expected to be the first Department chairperson. However, Tsegaye's inability to compromise on his naturally autocratic style of leadership led to major disputes even before courses began, and at the last minute he pulled out. The Department was in danger of being still-born.

At this point an ageing New Zealander who had once taken a diploma at London's Central School of Speech and Drama, but had for some twenty years been teaching English at Addis Ababa University, stepped into the breach. Haydn George, now in his seventies, still works at the University. His attitudes to both teaching and theatre are antiquated in the extreme. He speaks no Amharinya, has a penchant for Renaissance drama, and frequently stresses the importance of elocution. As the chairperson of a theatre department in a revolutionary African state, Haydn George was a distinctly anachronistic choice. Moreover, few senior Ethiopian theatre personnel were willing to work for what now seemed such a dubious enterprise. Only Tesfaye Gessesse and Haimanot Alemu could be prevailed upon to teach part-time classes in theatre history and acting, while George concentrated on speech and make-up! For the rest of the time, the twenty-five students who signed up for a drama degree had to take an assortment of literature and language courses provided by other departments.

The Theatre Arts Department has never entirely recovered its credibility after this ill-planned beginning. Senior academics have frequently questioned the Department's worth and have raised questions about whether such a practical subject should be included in the University's course offerings. The state has also had doubts about funding the Department, largely because it is obliged to guarantee employment to all University graduates at relatively high wages (500 Birr, or approximately \$250 per month, is the minimum salary), and has been unsure of how best to employ the yearly output of theatre graduates. Indeed, it is remarkable that the state has not only continued to support the Department but for several years provided for the employment of expatriate staff at relatively high cost.

Expatriate staff, with the exception of the South African, Robert McLaren, and a disaffected Russian, Ludmilla Sokolova, have all been British. Since the teaching-language of the University is English (itself a source of continuing internal debate), this is perhaps not entirely surprising; but I think this policy also illustrates continuing Ethiopian racism and isolationism. In other socialist African states, efforts have been made to recruit African staff and teach an African cultural model. As the home of the Organisation of African Unity, Ethiopia pays lip-service to Pan-Africanist ideologies,

but there remains a strong sense of racial superiority towards black Africa. Xenophobia extends to all foreigners, but among the educated classes it is modified towards the West by a respect for technological achievements. In Ethiopia, arts departments at the University do now teach courses on African culture, but specifically Ethiopian artistic models, followed by Western ones, are more highly regarded.

One can certainly ask questions about the effect Westerners have had on Ethiopian drama as a result of their influence in the Theatre Arts Department over the past decades. None arrived with any previous knowledge of Ethiopia, and their ideas of drama all related to far more westernised, community-oriented concepts of what constituted the performing arts than those that prevailed in the hierarchical traditions of professional Ethiopian theatre. The notion of cultural imperialism in relation to theatre has seldom been raised in Ethiopia. This is partly owing to a generally low level of debate about the place of culture within the nation, a sign not only of long-standing state repression of academic discussion and national isolation, but also of the continuing unquestioned strength of Amhara culture. Moreover, there is the misplaced notion that Ethiopian drama is similar to that practised in the West. Where practitioners have been concerned to maintain a specifically Ethiopian – for which read Amhara – outlook to drama, debate has related primarily to language and content. The idea that there might be alternative forms in the presentation of theatre, and that these might be of any great significance, has seldom been raised. Since Amharinya has never been questioned as the appropriate language for drama in Ethiopia, and most plays have been written about Ethiopian situations even when produced by foreigners, the expatriates' work has usually been seen positively rather than as an alien imposition. The expatriates have been valued primarily for their practical and technical skills, which are perceived as raising the professional standards of production within Ethiopian drama.

Initially, the Theatre Arts Department did put on some English language plays, but the first expatriate to be recruited, Helen Palmer, set a trend by mounting an improvised play in Amharinya. *Inba Ayhonem Mefithe* (Crying Won't Help) was the first of a series of Department-originated plays about the oppression of women, and set a precedent for a large proportion of practical work to be improvised around topical social issues.

As in Zimbabwe, but several years earlier, it was the appointment of Robert McLaren that really activated the Theatre Arts Department. McLaren and a specialist in folk-theatre, Peter Harrop, were both appointed to the Department in 1980. In 1981 Haydn George returned to teaching English and McLaren became chairperson of Theatre Arts. It was during the four years McLaren and Harrop spent in Addis Ababa that an identity was forged for the Department, and it was largely McLaren's philosophy which informed the direction of work undertaken and which underlay the curriculum implemented in the mid-Eighties. From this time on, the practical

content of course work was greatly increased. Tesfaye and Haimanot had resigned their jobs after a year and Helen Palmer left in 1981, but Mengistu Lemma, teaching play-writing, was a valuable new asset and the first graduate trainees were accepted as assistant lecturers that same year. In 1980 the Theatre Arts Department was given the use of the relatively modern and well-equipped theatre of the requisitioned German International School, as well as retaining access to the ramshackle hall of the University Cultural Centre.

As in Zimbabwe, McLaren sought to integrate the work of the Department with the outside world. He put on plays in conjunction with professional actors and with such groups as the ANC (which ran a Radio Freedom broadcasting service to South Africa from Addis Ababa). Within the Department itself a spate of plays, both improvised and scripted, were produced relating to African and, more often than not, South African concerns. Students were also encouraged to use theatre to examine current social issues in Ethiopia. Again, as in Zimbabwe, the University authorities proved resistant to McLaren's more radical ideas. He wished to set up a diploma course for some of the many professional actors who sought further training and tried to get permission for actors to audit selected courses. The University academic commission was adamant in its refusal to lower entry requirements to let in the professional actors. When attempts were made to introduce more folk-based elements of performance culture by employing a teacher of traditional dance, the authorities stipulated that he must hold a degree. This condition caused considerable difficulties, since the need for the course was occasioned by the fact that intellectuals are generally alienated from, and look down upon, the popular culture of *kinet*. Ultimately, collaborative ventures with outsiders were allowed only on an informal basis. What McLaren did succeed in doing was setting up the machinery for a reasonably comprehensive programme of mixed practical and theoretical actor training in Ethiopia.

As might be expected from an African Marxist working in Ethiopia, the new curriculum had three main components. Ethiopian theatre history and popular culture were to be taught, with all plays performed in Amharinya. Second, African drama occupied a prominent place on the curriculum. Third, Western theatre theory was introduced, with a particular emphasis on socialist producers like Brecht and the directors of the Russian revolutionary period. Students were encouraged to break with traditional resistances to an active approach to play-making. Not only were they to improvise and write much of the work produced, but the accepted vision of drama as a static, declamatory art form was challenged. Resistance amongst Ethiopian élites to what is still seen as demeaning practical activity runs deep. To persuade students to embrace a more active mode of performance is difficult, while portraying strong emotion of a personal nature, as in a love scene, is alien in the extreme to students from a culture which views such activities as

intensely private. Finally, the backstage roles of stage management and the practical running of a theatre have always been viewed as inferior, since these involve manual labour. For students to learn to take a holistic view of theatre which involved them in such activities required a major change in cultural perceptions.

The practical level of activity expected of drama students continues to prove traumatic to many who join the Department. As in Tanzania, societal perceptions of the position of theatre practitioners mean that large numbers seldom choose the course. In Tanzania in the past, the low profile of theatre has meant that on one occasion only a single student enrolled for the theatre course. In Ethiopia, numbers have never dropped below double figures but have ranged between ten and twenty-five students per year. However, in Ethiopia students do not always get their first choice of course, and there is a significant drop-out rate amongst those who have been placed in the Theatre Arts Department against their will.

Theatrical work continues to have relatively low status, for a variety of reasons. Traditionally, performers come from the lower classes, and in Ethiopia there is still a residual association with the *azmari*-caste grouping. Furthermore, performing in public is associated with immorality. This is a particular problem for women in all the societies I have examined. Female actors are expected to be of easy virtue, and are therefore often treated with a lack of respect which undoubtedly frightens many women off the idea of a career in the performing arts. Even where a woman herself wishes to participate as an artist, her family will often refuse permission for her to take part in such a "degrading" activity. During my time at Addis Ababa University I knew of several students who did not tell their parents that they were studying theatre. On a more practical level it is generally seen as imprudent for intelligent students to opt for an arts course. Many African students are under considerable pressure to attain good results and obtain a lucrative job, not merely for themselves but in order to assist an extended family which may have made considerable sacrifices to educate one of its members to degree-level. To be an accountant or a lawyer is both more prestigious and has far greater earning-potential than becoming involved in theatre.

Finally, there is the question of the sanity of the artist. Traditional African communalist and feudal societies tended to value conformity as necessary to the stability of society. Artists who question the status quo through socially or politically probing theatre, or who become involved in what are viewed as strange experiments with performance forms, may be seen as not only potentially dangerous, but also as possibly deranged. I have had several conversations over the years with African people who have seriously doubted the sanity of leading playwrights. In the conformist world of Amhara Ethiopia, to be an artist is regarded as extremely odd. There is not even the concept of eccentricity in Amharinya. Sanity consists in doing what everyone else does. To do otherwise is a sign of incipient madness.

These views of art are, of course, by no means exclusive to Africa. Artists have frequently been viewed as oddities throughout the world. Even within the states I am considering there are considerable differences in the viewpoint of those coming from more liberal urban environments and people from conservative rural areas. The vast majority of contemporary African theatre practitioners originate from the towns, especially from the heterodox capital cities of the continent. Many artists to whom I have spoken say that the old damaging preconceptions of artists are changing and that the status of performers is improving, but it is a slow process. Social reservations about artists continue to inhibit the development of contemporary African performance art.

Dergue attitudes towards the University tended to be cautious. The military leadership were aware of the debt they owed to the academic establishment, but at the same time they were wary of intellectuals as an articulate, potentially critical body.⁴³ Every department had state informers, and heads of departments were increasingly required to be party members. Open criticism of the state was not tolerated. This repression of academic freedom, coupled with continuing insularity, meant that in many disciplines very little research took place, and that what there was was often distorted by the requirements of political survival. Theoretical analysis of the role of theatre in Ethiopia is at a far less developed stage than in either Tanzania or Zimbabwe. Even research into traditional performance forms, encouraged by Peter Harrop, is still in its infancy, whilst the rare reviews of contemporary productions published under Marxist rule seldom dared to be more than mildly critical.⁴⁴

Increasingly, government policy was to isolate the University from the people – hence one reason why McLaren's plans for integration were rejected.⁴⁵ The interchange of ideas between intellectuals and urban dwellers, which contributed so much to sparking off the revolution, was not to be allowed to work later against the state. Yet, provided experiments were confined to the University campus, academics

⁴³ Government wariness about intellectuals seems to have been justified by the fact that after 1989 several demonstrations against the state were held by students. These were the first demonstrations in Addis Ababa since the Red Terror.

⁴⁴ Peter Harrop started a programme encouraging final-year students to write their senior papers on the traditional performance cultures of their home regions; this programme has begun to provide a fund of basic material on the art-forms of some ethnic groups. The national English language newspaper, the *Ethiopian Herald*, occasionally produces articles about contemporary theatre, but these are usually fairly anodyne.

⁴⁵ The policy of isolation was due to the fact that before the revolution it was University demonstrations which sparked off protests in many of the city's high schools. When students rioted in May 1990, tearing down pictures of Mengistu and burning records in the University party office, troops moved quickly to seal off the campus in an effort to prevent news of the students' actions from affecting the town.

were still allowed a degree of freedom in expressing their opinions which was considerably higher than that tolerated in open society. As far as drama was concerned the Theatre Arts Department was exempt from the ideological censorship which controlled the professional theatres. Officially, all scripts were supposed to be submitted to the Head of Department and a senior Party member, but this requirement was only loosely enforced. So long as productions were advertised only for student consumption, the Department was given considerable latitude in the form and content of its work. Many productions broke with the state preferred form of socialist realism (in its Ethiopian interpretation), while such plays as the 1985 revival of Mengistu's *Kassa* and my own Ethiopianised *Faustus*, which mocked both Christianity and Marxism, neither of which would have been allowed in the professional theatres, had no problem in gaining acceptance for a University audience.

Amongst students, play-writing has been one of the most popular and successful areas of development. Several plays have been written and produced which break with the restrictions of the proscenium arch and introduce elements of folk-culture in a way that would have been previously inconceivable. This new style of play-making was to begin to affect the outside world from the mid-Eighties, when graduates started to make an impression on the professional theatres and via the Amateur Arts Programme.

The impact of the Department's work on the wider Ethiopian theatre-world has been gradual because of the continuing hierarchical structures of the profession. Students began to be employed in the theatres, the regions and at the Ministry of Culture from 1981, but it took until the late Eighties before they started to make an impact as directors and writers. The new liberal notions of playmaking learnt from foreign and later domestic staff have given rise to conflicts with bureaucrats, older-style *azmari* actors and the dominant band of ageing dramaturges. Audiences themselves are also conservative and reluctant to embrace new styles of theatre. The clash of ideas resulting from Theatre Arts Department innovations has given rise to considerable conflict within the world of Ethiopian theatre. I shall discuss some of the new plays produced by theatre graduates in more detail below. Here it is sufficient to note that in spite of the socialist orientation of expatriate lecturers the majority of students were thoroughly disillusioned by the fundamentalist Marxism taught in Ethiopian educational establishments and opportunistically practised by the state. Because they were not permitted to write critical political theatre, students turned increasingly to social comedy and to experiments with translations of Western plays.

After Harrop and McLaren left in 1984 they were replaced by three Britons, myself and a married couple, Cliff Cocker and Mary Adossides. In spite of problems of lack of continuity, the policies initiated by McLaren were broadly carried

forward by the new staff, who could now work with a growing core of young, Department-trained, Ethiopian lecturers.

*The Amateur Arts Programme*⁴⁶

Although many of the theatre-arts graduates who work on the Amateur Arts Programme claim that the project was set up simply because the Ministry of Culture did not know how else to employ them, I think this is probably an unfair judgement. The Programme is a logical development of the movement which the Dergue encouraged in the late Seventies to organise *kinet* and agit-prop ensembles producing music, dance and simple drama for national days and local celebrations in rural settlements. So far as traditional *kinet* goes, this movement seems to have been highly successful. Most REYA groups (which existed in all villages) developed some kind of *kinet* troupe, and in 1987 the regional representative of the Ministry of Culture in Arsi claimed there were one thousand three hundred such groups registered in his area.⁴⁷

Part of the graduates' moans can be dismissed as sour grapes, because almost without exception the educated classes in Ethiopia covet work in the capital. Resentment against appointments to the regions exists to some degree in all the nations I have investigated, because life in capital cities is far more diverse and offers more opportunity for advancement than a provincial posting. However, the problem is particularly acute in Ethiopia as many regional centres are small and the generally urban Amhara theatre-graduates often have little in common with the mass of the people with whom they work, who are likely to be peasants from an alien ethnic group. The graduates also see such postings as second-rate employment, as students who do best in final exams tend to be employed either by the University or the central Ministry of Culture, whilst the most talented actors may be selected to go straight to work in the professional theatres.

The Amateur Arts Programme was set up in 1983, with the objective of sending trained arts personnel to act as animateurs throughout the Ethiopian regions. Cultural officers were to be sent from the areas of theatre, music, literature and fine art, all graduates of the appropriate higher-education institutes, and each to work from the regional capitals under the aegis of the local Ministry of Culture representative,

⁴⁶ There is no published work available about the Ethiopian Amateur Arts Programme. My findings are based on Ministry records, conversations with Ministry officials and visits to cultural officers in the regions of Arsi, Gojjam and Kaffa. For more detailed information, see my "Report on the Amateur Arts Programme being carried out by the Ministry of Culture, with particular reference to Theatre Arts in Kaffa, Arsi and Gojjam Regions," and ch. 7 of my M.Phil.

⁴⁷ Interview with Girma Elias, Regional Representative of the Ministry of Culture, Arsi Region, Assela, December 1987.

who was generally a party bureaucrat rather than an artist. The Ethiopian attitude to promoting people's arts is different from the policies operating in Tanzania and Zimbabwe. In the latter nations, with their commitment to demonstrating populist, equal-opportunity attitudes, regional amateur cultural programmes have been set up to penetrate quickly into all areas even if cultural officers are initially unqualified for their work. In contrast, hierarchical Ethiopia chose the option of sending only a few, but relatively highly trained, people to promote amateur arts. Since each training institution only graduates a small number of students each year, it took until 1987 before a trainer was available in each discipline in every region. By the following year the progress of the civil war meant that the programme had to be withdrawn from Eritrea and Tigray.⁴⁸

The development of the Amateur Arts Programme within the regions was overseen by local committees made up of interested party-members, which always included the representative of the Ministry of Culture and an ideologue from regional Party headquarters who ensured that censorship was carried out in line with government policies. As the central Ministry only funded offices and salaries it was up to these committees to allocate regional funds or raise money for arts initiatives.⁴⁹

What such a situation gave rise to was essentially yet more "airport culture." The committees and party officers wanted entertainment for grand occasions and, as ever, what was most popular was the uncontentious traditional dance culture. Although the central Ministry of Culture did not recognise the existence of professional companies in the regions, in practice each local party headquarters supported a troupe; indeed, such companies might be argued to be the modern equivalent of the court *azmaris* kept by the nobility to sing praises and entertain retainers. Originally these troupes were performers of traditional *kinet*, but with the help of the new arts animateurs many have branched out into modern jazz music (Ethiopian-style) and, to a lesser extent, drama production.

The reasons the central Ministry wished to deny the companies professional status is that, while a skilled jazz musician may be imported at considerable cost from Addis Ababa and can make up to two hundred and fifty Birr per month, a young female dancer earns as little as thirty Birr. Even in Ethiopia this is recognised as an unliveable wage.

⁴⁸ Ethiopia subsequently subdivided many regions, and the position has since been complicated by the secession of Eritrea.

⁴⁹ The regions I visited had used various means to raise money for arts funding. In Gojjam a major arts festival held on a one-off basis in 1985 raised 400,000 Birr. The professional company also raised money from a bar attached to their theatre. Arsi is the richest region in Ethiopia and levies funds for cultural work from primary organisations (REYA, REWA, Peasant's Associations, etc); in Kaffa, funds came directly from party offices.

Theoretically, the arts amateurs are merely based in the regional capital and are meant to travel out to villages to give advice and training to interested groups (see Figs. 5–8). However, only negligible funds are allocated to travel, and a region may be many hundreds of miles across; so, apart from a very few visits to larger settlements or to villages within easy reach of the regional capital, almost all work is focused on the main town. In practice, arts trainers frequently end up working predominantly with the regional professional companies which have the time and inclination to broaden their skills, with secondary and further education institutes in the regional capitals, and sometimes with a few professional workers who are themselves in “exile” from Addis Ababa.

The ruling party as a whole demonstrated little interest in, and considerable wariness about, the rural development of the arts. Regional representatives often attempted to restrict cultural workers to largely administrative tasks. However, in all the areas I visited for my research, theatre workers had managed to continue practical training and production work, often in their own time and with little outside support. This situation contrasted favourably with that in Tanzania, where cultural officers seemed to be predominantly working as administrators. I suspect that arts workers in Ethiopia have felt better able to resist pressure to become office-bound because they are more highly trained and confident of their abilities to promote practical projects directly with interested groups. They also have the dubious benefit of little centralised direction. This can be either a plus- or a minus-factor, for it means that the extent to which programmes develop depends heavily on both the cultural worker’s own initiative and on the support or otherwise of regional officials for the arts.⁵⁰ As might be expected from the traditions of Ethiopian bureaucracy, officials are often highly conservative. Under Dergue rule many plays were stopped or altered when material might be construed as being critical of the state. Comedy was often viewed with misgiving, and officials tended to want either revivals of safe Addis Ababa favourites or improvised plays lauding the party-line. Clear evidence of the central Ministry’s lack of priority for the Amateur Arts Programme was demonstrated by the fact that it took them five years, until 1988, to establish a central office to administer the scheme.

Much of the most popular work has come from improvised plays dealing with local problems. I encountered several plays discussing education issues, including demoralisation of teachers, promiscuity amongst staff and students and absenteeism. Although officials had sometimes ordered the presentation of these problems to be watered down, the plays proved popular on tour and were often the topic of informal discussion after the event. Other issues commonly raised in improvised plays were

⁵⁰ Although many officials show little concern for the arts, I have met some regional cultural and Party administrators who were extremely keen to promote cultural activity, but who often felt they lacked information on how best to proceed.

alcoholism, infidelity and the abuse of women, especially wife-beating (see Figs. 7–8). A major problem with the Ethiopian programme is that a play is rarely planned to be part of any wider self-help scheme. There is little theoretical knowledge of how community drama has been used for self-help in other countries, and officials have been wary of letting the arts be controlled by community groups for their own purposes. Even development theatre is limited, although in Arsi I encountered plays which had been commissioned by health officials to promote vaccination programmes and a piece created to coincide with a purge on corruption. There were also continued demands for plays glorifying military achievements.

The scripted plays I heard of ranged from Chekhov's *The Bear* and Shaw comedies through to contemporary Ethiopian drama. My own experiences indicate that social comedies by writers like Mengistu Lemma and the young theatre graduate Fisseha Beley were by far the most popular scripted plays throughout the regions, despite state disapproval of levity in drama. Official wariness regarding drama was demonstrated by the restrictions put on touring plays. *Kinet* groups may travel widely within their home regions, but I was told of frequent cases in the mid-Eighties where officials had been reluctant to provide funding for touring drama, even when it had been proved that gate receipts produced a net profit for such ventures.⁵¹ The unfortunate consequence of this reluctance to allow innovation was that many plays only got performed a very few times, and then only in urban areas.

In spite of all these problems drama seems to be gaining in popularity, particularly among youth groups and students – many have requested training to improve performance skills, and undertake schools tours and the like (see Figs. 11–14). In most cases drama groups are built on already existing *kinet* bands, and in several cases I found that musicians and theatre workers have collaborated to produce, not integrated theatre, but variety programmes of drama and modern and traditional music. Much as in the Addis Ababa of the Thirties, and today among Tanzanian cultural troupes, I was told that experience had shown that the best way to build up an audience for drama in rural areas was to put on mixed music, *kinet* and drama shows, and that with return performances plays grew in popularity.

The limited amount of work that does go on in modern performance arts in the regions seems to depend heavily on the presence of “experts.” On several occasions the Ministry has run intensive training programmes in selected areas, lasting for up to six months, with the declared aim of teaching participants enough for them to return home and set up their own amateur arts clubs. Apart from the fact that “volunteers” for such courses are sometimes found on closer investigation to be

⁵¹ A prime example of the potential profitability of touring theatre in the regions was a visit by the Arsi professional group to the building-site of a massive new hydro-electric power station at Melkokenar. In two days of performances the troupe netted a profit of 5,000 Birr.

pressed men, or to have enrolled purely for the diplomas and per-diem payments the courses provide, teaching tended to be organised in such a way that it did not promote self-reliance. A special course in Jimma in 1986–87 involved half a dozen trainers and twenty-six students from throughout Kaffa region. However, trainers themselves had no experience of how to work as enablers and tended to run their groups as directors rather than as animateurs. This reinforced the traditional reluctance among ordinary people to initiate activity. When I visited Kaffa region nearly two years after the training programme, no follow-up work had been carried out and the new amateur groups existed only on paper.

The Amateur Arts Programme in Ethiopia remains highly selective, generally affecting only the more educated sectors of society in regional capitals. If Tanzania suffers from an excess of theory about community art, with little practical action, Ethiopia has a few highly motivated individuals but no concept of overall aims for community theatre, not even the central focus for work provided by the competitive structure prevalent in the other countries I am considering. Like Tanzania, the habit of submission to higher authority, which in Ethiopia has so often been imposed by force, has heavily restricted any regional artistic development beyond traditional spheres. Moreover, the situation is not helped by cultural workers' view of themselves as enduring a period of exile (usually two to three years) in the regions before they are recalled to the "civilisation" of Addis Ababa. Some high-quality innovative theatre backed by considerable enthusiasm was produced in the regions in the Eighties, but in the absence of a central commitment to rural-arts promotion and a genuine desire to work on an equal basis with rural peoples for their benefit, it seems unlikely that the Programme can be of more than isolated value.

State control and the professional theatres

The area of Ethiopian drama over which the Marxist state maintained the tightest control was the professional theatre in the capital. Theoretically, the Ministry of Culture allocated scripts from its bank of approved plays to all theatre houses, except the autonomous City Hall Theatre. However, in practice senior management and Ministry officials often negotiated over which plays a director would like to produce. The system meant that playwrights had to give scripts directly to the Ministry of Culture, which passed judgement on artistic merit and handed work on to the Ministry of Information for political clearance. When this system was introduced in 1983 Ministry control was limited to full-length scripts, but in 1987 even the one-act plays which accompany *kinet* shows and are produced for special occasions had to be submitted to the same process. As a result, the drama seen on the professional stage in Ethiopia was almost entirely devoid of political comment. Interestingly, there was not even much propaganda drama in the final years of Dergue rule, presumably because such work could not command an audience. Instead,

the state preferred to promote anodyne, commercially successful drama, which meant high dosages of romance, revivals of old favourites, and little that was in any way challenging or innovative.

It was a common complaint amongst theatre practitioners that the Ministry of Culture was concerned only with political conformity and commercial success. Financial control was in the hands of the Ministry, which dictated seat prices (expensive at six to eight Birr) and took all box-office receipts after the fifty-percent cut due to playwright and director. The theatres have to bid on a yearly basis for a budget allocation. In 1989 the National Theatre's share was just under a million Birr to run a *kinet* group, two modern music ensembles and the theatre company, as well as maintaining a large theatre-complex. The Ministry often preferred to show cheaply bought foreign films than to take the risks involved in mounting a new play.

All these actions indicated a state attitude towards culture which was ideologically bankrupt. In Mengistu's Ethiopia one could not debate the nature of government policy towards culture or the extent to which the state should seek to involve arts in the development process, as one could in Tanzania or Zimbabwe. One could barely even talk about how the state sought to use the arts to support its policies, for those policies were almost exclusively about control. Theatre in Addis Ababa is an established part of city life and costs the state little, as the theatres cover a large part of their costs. The value of the theatres to the state in the Eighties was primarily as an opiate. Their function was not to make people think, but to distract audiences from the increasing tensions of everyday life. It was in the state use of the professional theatre that one could most clearly see the artistic betrayal by the Ministry of Culture of the socialist idealism which flared so high in the years immediately following Haile Selassie's overthrow.

Since the situation was so bleak, it was perhaps surprising that considerable enthusiasm for drama remained among both theatre practitioners and audiences. A popular play could produce queues of people prepared to wait several hours to get a ticket, and, until runs were restricted in 1989 to a maximum of six months, favoured plays could be in performance for up to three years. Here one has to take into account the lack of alternative entertainment in the city. Addis Ababa is a city of bars, with thousands of small houses providing alcohol, coffee and casual prostitution, but bar culture is primarily a male affair. Football matches and films are also generally packed with young men. Television is available only to the élite, which leaves radio as the common public source of mass entertainment. However, for live entertainment suitable for all the family the theatre houses provide *kinet* and theatre in a style which is specifically Ethiopian and therefore readily accessible to the people. Although theatre-going is restricted to the middle classes it is often very much a family affair. As in every other sphere of public entertainment, it is the young men of independent income who predominate in audiences, but couples, parents with children and even

groups of women can also be seen in the theatres. The imposition of strict censorship largely robbed drama of its intellectual audience. Students attended University productions, but the élite no longer went to the theatres in order to hear the latest ideas. Instead, theatre-going became the preserve of the *petit bourgeoisie*, who attended in search of entertainment.

Kinet shows were still more popular than drama, and every weekend *kinet* groups could be found performing in *kebele* halls around town. Organisations like the University and police and army units also maintained companies. A *kinet* show can range from purely ethnic song and dance through to the elaborate, four-hour performances mounted on a weekly basis at the theatres. In these latter shows the separate traditional and modern music companies supported by the theatres each perform. Soloists, comics and poets also make an appearance, although the drama company may contribute excerpts, sketches or a one-act play. The caste structures which riddle Ethiopian society mean that, while performers from any discipline may be national stars, the often uneducated traditional *kinet* performers are still looked down upon as inferior *azmaris*. Modern musicians have a higher status, while actors, increasingly dominated by University graduates, see themselves as a breed apart.

In keeping with the overall tone of Amhara culture, an Ethiopian *kinet* show is a far more restrained and dignified affair than the performance of a Tanzanian cultural troupe, close cousins though the two are in format. In Ethiopia audiences are separated from performers by an end-stage arrangement. Alcohol and prostitutes are not part of the amenities available in theatre houses, and styles of acting and dancing tend to be more restrained. However, essentially *kinet* shows and the performances of cultural troupes appeal to a similar class of urban citizen. It is regrettable that – even more so than in Tanzania, because such performances are seen as lower class – *kinet* has been the subject of little research.

Within drama companies the advent of increasing numbers of University graduates, with their Western-influenced ideas of what constitutes “good” acting, has been slowly making an impact on dramatic presentation, but the dominant melodramatic, symbolic style still has a powerful hold over professional drama and has become accepted as the “normal” form of performance by Ethiopian audiences. This style has even exerted a powerful influence over leading directors like Debebe Eshetu, Abate Mekuria and Getachew Abdi who trained in the West, and has become the vernacular mode of Ethiopian drama.

The style is heavily emblematic. One can tell characters by their stereotyped behaviour and dress. The nobility and major characters in serious plays tend to be dressed in rich, sombre fabrics. They move relatively little and declaim their lines rather than conversing. Serious drama is usually presented in dark shades with massive ceremonial sets, and prominent characters are often picked out by follow-spots. In contrast, comedy and the lower classes are shown in a manic, often crudely

slapstick style. Action is non-stop and every line is played for laughs. The fool is often some kind of cripple – and foreigners are generally fools. The spoken word retains its dominance over Ethiopian drama, which abounds in purple passages played for every ounce of emotion and often rewarded by audience ovations. Tsegaye Gebre-Medhin told me that his *Tewodros* started as a twenty-minute poetic monologue which he wrote for the eponymous hero; this speech was incorporated into the full-length play, and the playwright claims it is still the most popular part of the work.

Consistency in presentation is widely ignored. Characters can be dressed in clothing of different periods and plastic props may well be used in a historical drama. It is the symbolism of props and costumes which is far more important than their approximation to naturalistic truth. Ethiopian actors claim to act in a predominantly realistic style, but I would contend that the dominant form still owes much to church and court influences. Psychological realism has little place in a drama which largely deals with the metaphysics of good and evil. It is extremely difficult for a foreigner to make value judgements on such an alien form of theatre. What is clear is that it is a style specific to Ethiopia, which has evolved from the élite art-forms of the Amhara, orthodox-Christian aristocracy.

For better or for worse, it is this traditional style of drama that is coming under attack by the Theatre Arts Department graduates, whose training has encouraged them to push for greater psychological realism and experimentation with a range of dramatic styles. They also tend to reject the heroic dramas which have played such a large part in the Ethiopian canon, in favour of plays dealing with the lives of ordinary people. Accordingly, Bekele Tefara, one of the Theatre Arts Department's first graduates, revived Tsegaye's *Ye Kermasow* at the City Hall, but left *Tewodros* and *Othello* to Abate Mekuria,⁵² while successful Department-trained playwrights like Fisseha Beley and Astelkachew Yihun produce social comedies with serious undertones about the plights of the rural and urban poor respectively.

Regrettably, the arrogance of some graduate actors, coupled with resentment of the relatively high wages they earn as soon as they start work, has widened the rift with older actors and *kinet* performers. This is not universally so, but it is recognised as a problem to such a degree that in some theatres directors may chose to mount one play with a preponderance of older actors and the next with mainly graduates. However, it was in the area of directing that until recently graduates had most difficulty making any headway. While some untrained actors were keen to learn from graduates and would like to have the opportunity to undergo more formal training, the cabal of established directors was not open to suggestions for change and was

⁵² All three of these plays were popular successes at the City Hall during the Eighties.

deeply suspicious of the challenge posed by theatre-graduates. The most extreme case was that of Abate Mekuria at the City Hall Theatre.⁵³

Abate was in charge of the City Hall Theatre continuously until the 1991 revolution. The theatre is unique, in that it does not fall under the direct control of the Ministry of Culture, and it appears that so long as Abate ran a commercially successful venture the municipality interfered very little with his plans. Until he quarrelled with Tsegaye Gebre-Medhin in 1988, Abate had put on a programme which throughout the Eighties featured only Tsegaye's work. The playwright's *Gammo* was ordered off the stage by the censor after only one performance, but *Othello*, *Tewodros* and Tsegaye's version of Molière's *Tartuffe* each ran for up to three years. These plays were popular with audiences, but the level of blatant collusion between the two men led to an anonymous skit being circulated in 1987 which showed Tsegaye and Abate discussing how they would plan a programme together to maintain their stranglehold over the theatre until the year 2010.⁵⁴

Until 1987 Abate resisted all pressure to admit University graduates to his company. Other theatre managers tended to select two or three top students each year to join their troupes, but Abate recruited no permanent actors of any kind between 1976 and 1987. Even when members of the original company left they were not replaced. In the suspicion-riddled world of Ethiopian theatre, Abate Mekuria stood out as the director most jealously retaining his power, and possibly most nervous about losing it. However, the rift with Tsegaye (the reason for which I have failed to discover) appears to have led Abate to a change of heart. In his final years at the City Hall he recruited a number of Department graduates and started putting on plays by a variety of writers.

In other theatres there has been a slow trickle of graduate recruitment. The position is complicated by the fact that, as actors are civil servants, it is extremely hard to dispense with the services of unwanted staff, and there is little natural wastage since employment of any kind is hard to find in Addis Ababa. There is also a problem of underemployment among contracted actors. When a theatre mounts only two or three shows a week and when runs last several months, actors in a thirty-strong company may find themselves with very little work for much of the time. In several cases graduate actors have sought to work off their frustrated enthusiasm by taking on extra jobs. Shows have been planned jointly with the Theatre Arts Department, celebratory works have been put on with organisations like the ANC, and revues have been organised for OAU events. In 1989 a group of university staff and City

⁵³ Abate Mekuria was extremely suspicious of outside interference in his theatre. He was the only person in Ethiopia I asked to interview for this book who refused to see me.

⁵⁴ The play was written in English and posted to all the senior people in the world of Ethiopian theatre. A copy was shown to me by Mengistu Lemma, who, I suspect, may have been the author of the piece.

Hall actors tried to set up a part-time independent company. Such one-off ventures had been allowed, but the threat of an independent rival did not go down well with Abate Mekuria, who never withheld permission from his actors to join the new venture but constantly rearranged rehearsal schedules so that actors never knew when they would be free. The venture eventually had to be abandoned.

Graduates were often critical of the dictatorial style of direction imposed by older theatre managers, but although they had intense quarrels among themselves, the established group of directors tended to close ranks against the threat of new competition. Men like Bekele Tefara, Solomon Woubeyehu, Kiros Haile-Selassie and Tefari Alemu all worked in the professional theatres for nine or ten years, but until the fall of Mengistu they were restricted to directing the occasional one-act piece or assisting on major works.

Even when given directing opportunities, the graduates were not allowed to indulge in any very radical experimentation. The primacy of the word and the fact that playwrights often work closely with directors on productions means that scripts can seldom be altered. When Tefari Alemu tried to amend a particularly inept comedy by a party stalwart, the playwright became so enraged that he withdrew his work.⁵⁵ Nor could young directors break too obviously with the established style of production. They have tended to work in a more realistic manner than had been usual, but few experiments have been tolerated which fundamentally break with the formality of the proscenium arch and move away from the accepted Ethiopian style of production.

Mostly, the professional companies work out of their large and ageing proscenium-arch theatres. However, until the final years of the civil war, when travel became dangerous, all the companies sent a troupe on annual tour for some two months of the year. These tours were very popular with the educated classes which form an Amhara administrative core in larger centres throughout Ethiopia. Touring is a strenuous business, since halls tend to be fairly basic and centres may be hundreds of miles apart, but the commitment to such work bolstered the credibility of drama as an integral part of national urban cultural life.

Finally there was one independent professional company in town, run by Mathewos Bekele, which performed predominantly slapstick comedies in the Mercato area of town. As with so much that happened in Ethiopia, the group seemed to be allowed to continue work simply because it had been in existence long enough to become an accepted part of life in Addis Ababa. While new groups were never forbidden, permission to perform in *kebele* halls was so difficult to obtain, and

⁵⁵ Information from Tefari Alemu, actor and director, Ager Fikir Theatre (interview, Addis Ababa, September 1989).

bureaucratic red tape so extensive under the Dergue, that no-one else was able to follow in Mathewos' footsteps.

The size of the state-run professional theatre movement in Ethiopia is unique in black Africa. State control coupled with power-seeking individuals turned the theatres in the Eighties into conservative centres providing largely inconsequential entertainment, but memories of the earlier role of drama and enthusiasm for new experiments with theatre remained strong among many young playwrights, directors and actors.

Plays of the Eighties

In the last ten years of Dergue rule, the most famous voices of the revolutionary theatre were all silenced. Repression had already affected lesser playwrights in the late Seventies, but the work of Tsegaye, Tesfaye and Mengistu Lemma continued unchallenged. Yet, after 1985, none of these men produced a new play until the present régime came into power.

The politically critical plays of the Eighties can be counted on one hand, and all belong to the first half of the decade. Following on from *Iqaw* and *Tehaddiso* Tesfaye Gessesse continued, in two further plays, his examinations of how fear and mystification can be used as instruments of control. *Cherchez Les Femmes* was produced in 1980 at the Ager Fikir and subsequently at the Ras, and *Ferdu Leinante* (The Judge-ment Is For You) was put on in 1984 at the National Theatre. Both plays take the form of open-ended mysteries in which the audience rather than the playwright is finally required to pass judgement – a technique by which Tesfaye was able to avoid accusing government forces outright of corruption and terrorism while making his own views clear.

Cherchez Les Femmes centres on the mysterious death of an affluent citizen in his car. The play subsequently takes the form of an investigation as to whether the man caused his car to explode by carelessly dropping a cigarette or whether he was the victim of a political assassination. In *Ferdu Leinante* the plot deals with another mysterious death. A rich man apparently commits suicide. However, it later emerges that his secretary may have killed him because of the man's intention to abandon their long-term affair and return to his wife. As the murder case unravels in court, questions are raised as to whether the corpse is really that of the businessman in question, who may have fled the country disillusioned with the Marxist government. Moreover, the police are revealed as corrupt. Ultimately the audience is left to decide if the secretary is a murderess or the victim of a web of unsavoury machinations. Such explicit suggestions that the state could be involved in terrorism and cor-

ruption were highly dangerous. Tesfaye admitted to me that if he had not been so well-known either play could have got him into considerable trouble.⁵⁶

Mengistu Lemma's last play appeared in 1985 at the National Theatre. *Shumiya* (Office Scramble) is about high-level state corruption. The title is a piece of *double entendre* in the best traditions of *qene*, for it could relate to the possession of high office, to the confusion reigning in state offices, or to a scramble for power. The play avoids apparent criticism of the Marxist government by being set in the pre-revolutionary period. *Shumiya* deals with the matter of an American company which wants to set up a business in Ethiopia, and with the delicate negotiations about what bribes the young Minister of Commerce and Industry requires to give necessary permissions. When the previous minister finds that the young man intends to keep all the bribes for himself, he reports the case to the Emperor, who reinstates his old trustee so that the money can be shared all round; the greedy young man is consequently left out in the cold. The underlying suggestion that accusations of corruption in high places might be applied to the new régime was recognised by many in the allegorical role of the young man. The play led to a newspaper debate as to whether Mengistu was an anti-revolutionary championing the old over the new, but the playwright told me how he finessed his critics by writing a reply under a pen-name, claiming that the play was highly progressive in that it demonstrated the glories of the present as opposed to the evil imperial régime.⁵⁷ The play was allowed to continue its run.

Neither playwright produced any work subsequent to these plays. The inference one has to draw is that, in the last years of the Emperor's reign, self-censorship had reached such heights that even those writers whose fame had previously offered them a modicum of protection decided that it was impossible in the prevailing political climate for them to voice, even covertly, their true opinions. Perhaps the most telling case of all relates to the muzzling of Tsegaye Gebre-Medhin. Whereas Tsegaye's earlier works were constantly revived, the final two plays he endeavoured to produce under the Dergue were both stopped after a single performance. It has been difficult to find much information about these plays (Tsegaye was reluctant to talk to me about them), but the evidence suggests that some time in the late Seventies the playwright considerably modified his earlier pro-Dergue views.

Gammo, rehearsed for performance at the City Hall in 1978, tells the story of two brothers who become involved on opposite sides of the war in Eritrea. They later meet on the battlefield and try to save each other. The pacifist tone of the play, and the doubts it cast on the justness of the war, resulted in a ban after the play's very

⁵⁶ Interview with Tesfaye Gessesse, playwright and chairman of Theatre Arts Department, Addis Ababa University, Addis Ababa, January 1988.

⁵⁷ Interview with Mengistu Lemma, Addis Ababa, November 1987.

first performance. Tsegaye then produced no new work until, in 1985, he tried to put on a translation of *Hamlet*. Presumably he felt that a translation would be less likely to be seen by the censors as politically relevant to Ethiopia, but the themes of coup and corruption struck a chord with the Dergue, and *Hamlet* too was stopped after one performance before an artists-only audience. No further action has been taken against Tsegaye, who retains his prestige as Ethiopia's premier playwright, but after the Dergue banned the work of such a man no-one else has tried to assume the mantle of the politically critical dramatist.

Since the agit-prop movement lost its dynamism, many of the plays produced in the city have been light romances, sometimes translated from Western scripts. There were several very poor such plays which were put on purely because the playwrights were trusted party men, and a theatre slot was a simple way of handing out rewards for loyalty. Debebe Seifu wrote several moralistic romances, as did the Theatre Arts graduate Yohannes Berhanu, but the most blatant case of ministerial manipulation of the kind of drama that reached the stage must be the 1987 production of Telahun Gugsah's *Tizibt* (The Watchers) at the Ager Fikir. Telahun used to be Tsegaye Gebre-Medhin's secretary. Although the man has little education, Tsegaye pushed for his protégé to become Head of the Arts Division at the Ministry of Culture. Informants tell me that Telahun received scant respect from other staff. He therefore determined to prove his artistic credentials by writing a play. The rumour is that *Tizibt* was largely ghost-written.⁵⁸ The play attracted poor audiences and was scorned by actors, but when I revisited Addis Ababa in early 1990 another Telahun Gugsah piece was in the offing.

The most original works on the Ethiopian stage in recent years have been the social comedies written by Theatre Arts Department graduates such as Fikkere Tulusah with his *Mekabir Kofariuma Yeressa Satin Shachu* (The Grave Digger and the Coffin Maker), Astelkachew Yihun with *Anchin Alu* (They Called You, Girl) and Yililina Tseset (Remorseful Conscience), and above all Fisseha Beley with *Simen Sintayehu* (Simen Sintayehu), *Hoda Yifejew* (To Keep the Secret), *Alkash Na Zefegn* (The Mourner and the Singer) and *Ashegre Meseret* (Ashegre Meseret).⁵⁹ These plays deal with social problems: youth unemployment, the degradations of extreme poverty, the position of women, and the evils of tricksters and superstition. I think one can see a strong Mengistu Lemma influence in the comic construction of the plays, while the Sixties trend towards centering drama on the plight of ordinary people is taken even further by the new playwrights, who have set their work exclusively among the poor and the peasantry.

⁵⁸ For political reasons, the people who gave me this information cannot be named.

⁵⁹ All these plays were written and performed in the Eighties, but none has been published.

The most exciting work comes from Fisseha Beley. Fisseha is unusual, in that he comes from rural Shoa and sets his work in the context of traditions of rural life. He has also broken with end-stage conventions and his plays involve a high level of interaction with audiences. His works are some of the first to give an inside view of the peasantry rather than looking down from above, and have proved popular both with amateur rural groups and in the professional theatres of Addis Ababa.⁶⁰

The problems of women are a common topic in Fisseha's work. Both *Hoda Yifejew* and the playwright's most popular piece, *Simen Sintayehu*, describe the efforts of country women to escape from oppressive husbands, and are good examples of Fisseha's style. In *Hoda Yifejew* (see Figs. 3–4) a woman has been married against her will to a wife-beater. From the start we have little sympathy with the brutal husband, and the play centres on how wife and lover plan to make their escape. The plot gives plenty of scope for farce, since the lover appears dressed as a female cousin of the bride. With the help of a sympathetic village elder, the lovers tell the husband that he can only have children if he and his wife go through a ceremony of ritual beating tied to the central pole of their "tukul" (hut). After the wife has submitted to this ceremony, she ties her husband and beats him soundly before the lovers flee, leaving the wife-beater to the humiliating fate of being found tied up and deserted in his own house.

In *Simen Sintayehu* the farce is more complicated. The eponymous heroine is the subject of a traditional court-case between two men, each of whom claims to be her husband. As the case unravels two more men appear who also say Simen is married to them. Only at the end does our heroine explain herself. She has indeed married each of the men in turn, in a vain effort to find a decent husband.

Fisseha's heroines are a new kind of woman on the Ethiopian stage, for they seek their own fulfilment without shame and without accepting that women should passively accept their fate. Fisseha manages to combine social discussion with farce, and he draws on Ethiopian tradition to root his work firmly in the rural culture of Amhara peasant life.

Finally, a small group of avant-garde directors centred on the University and headed by Manyazawel Endeshaw expressed their disgust with Ethiopian politics and the kind of theatre promoted by the Ministry of Culture by turning to blatantly minority experimentation with form – the only area left in which it was possible to make radical experiments. Productions like the 1989 versions of Edward Albee's *The Zoo Story* and Strindberg's *The Stronger* (both in translation) had little to do with Ethiopian culture and could only be shown to the élite audience at the University. However, such experiments, which featured an absurdist style of presentation, speak

⁶⁰ Fisseha's plays have been successfully produced in several regions, as well as at the University and, more recently, in the professional theatres.

volumes about the levels of disillusionment and the need for artistic escape felt by some of the more intellectual theatre practitioners.

Theatre under the transitional government

The analysis in this final section on Ethiopian theatre is drawn from two fairly brief visits to the country in August 1992 and April 1993. Because of time restrictions and the uncertainties of life in Ethiopia at present, it is impossible to make definitive statements regarding how theatre will develop. Strong forces for change exist at some government levels, among progressive theatre practitioners, and increasingly among a growing number of companies which are coming into existence outside the state-supported theatre world. However, the weight of inertia, bureaucracy and corruption still lies heavy on all state organisations, and, at a time when government will to open itself to democratic criticism appears to be failing, efforts to transform the Ethiopian arts institutions face an uphill struggle.

The most obvious change in the official theatre-world has been the removal of the senior managers of the Addis Ababa theatres. It is hardly surprising that the Dergue loyalists like Getachew Abdi were removed from positions of influence. What is more interesting is that they were replaced by a group of people a whole generation younger, who had no previous experience of executive power. All of these new managers are graduates of the Theatre Arts Department. Theatre lecturer and director Manyazawel Endeshaw was put in charge of the important National Theatre. The Ager Fikir was given to actor and junior director Tafari Alemu, and, in what was widely seen as an appointment to do with politics rather than ability, Tomas Tora moved from working as an actor at the National to take charge of the Ras Theatre. At the City Hall, staff demanded the removal of Abate Mekuria, and Ethiopia's first woman theatre executive, Jemanesh Solomon, was elected to power. With the exception of Tomas Tora, these new managers represent the flower of the theatre-graduates and are leading radical voices in terms of wanting both more democratic administration and an experimental theatre for Ethiopia based on dedicated intellectual actors, writers and directors.

It is interesting to consider what the new senior management of the Ministry of Culture was looking for in making such appointments. They obviously wished to remove cultural leadership from a group of people heavily implicated in supporting Dergue rule, and as a young guerrilla movement – Meles Zenawi is only in his thirties – the TGE probably relishes the idea of new brooms sweeping clean. Tomas Tora and Jemanesh Solomon are both connected with government figures. Tomas Tora's appears to be the most obviously political appointment. His theatrical credentials are slight. After graduating he worked in Jimma for some years on the Amateur Arts Programme but achieved little, and his appointment was apparently made because he is related to a minister in the new régime. Jemanesh Solomon was apparently demo-

cratically elected by City Hall theatre workers, but the fact that she had recently married a senior member of the EPRDF has inevitably led to rumours that her appointment was also the result of political pressure from above.

If one ignores the anomaly of Tomas Tora, the other three managers all have a history of working, often together, on projects to translate, direct and perform plays which looked most often to experimental Western theatre for their inspiration. All were clearly dissociated from any implication in Dergue politics and were known to have opposed various figures in the old theatre leadership.⁶¹ Moreover, none of these people were involved in what I only recently learned was the widescale corruption going on in the Ethiopian professional theatres prior to the overthrow of Mengistu.

Favouritism in terms of who got to direct, what plays were performed, and how roles were allocated was widely acknowledged to be part of the Addis Ababa theatre-world, but I had certainly not realised quite how far-reaching this was. The problem had a strong financial aspect, since playwrights and directors receive such a large percentage of the takings for a play. The common perception is now that people seek to write or direct on stage purely to make money, and this can hardly encourage artistic values. All the theatres are massively overstaffed. The National has some two hundred people on its payroll, yet I was told that possibly as many as three-quarters of these do very little. In order to have a peaceful life the old management appointed new staff but seldom made anyone redundant. Redundancies are a difficult subject, because alternative work is hard to come by, but an enormous percentage of theatre budgets is swallowed up by wage-bills for superfluous personnel. Finally, I had not known of the systematic exploitation of women in the Ethiopian professional theatre. It was apparently standard practice for many managers and directors to require sexual favours of a woman before casting her in a play.

The problems of corruption are compounded by the strength of conservative habit in Ethiopia, which sees all change as almost inevitably for the worse. Recent research I conducted into the lives of women in Ethiopian theatre demonstrated an extraordinary lack of flexibility in allotting work roles. Zenebech Tesfaye, an actress at the National Theatre, had performed only the role of maid in a whole range of plays over a nearly forty-year time-span. Moreover, she appeared to find this perfectly normal and acceptable. Staff are often reluctant to undertake new tasks unless this means an obvious increase in prestige or salary. A mixture of inertia and a

⁶¹ While a junior director at the Ager Fikir, Tafari Alemu got into trouble for re-writing what he claims was an appallingly un-theatrical play by a party favourite – to such an extent that the playwright took umbrage and withdrew the script. Jemanesh Solomon's first-ever feminist critique of how women were portrayed in Ethiopian plays caused a considerable furore when presented at a theatre conference in the late Eighties, and both Jemanesh and Manyazawel Endeshaw were central to the attempt to set up an independent experimental theatre group in the same period.

paralysing sense of hierarchy pervades the theatres and acts as a brake on any attempt at restructuring or flexibility.

The new managers cannot hope to deal with all these problems without support from above. The new head of theatre at the Ministry of Culture is Indalla Dembel, an EPRDF man who is certainly considerably more open in his style than the Dergue bureaucrats who previously wielded power. Under Indalla, new structures have been set up to decentralise control of the theatres. Most crucially, the choice of plays to be performed is to be made by committees from each of the theatres. These will still have to include a Ministry official, but will otherwise be made up of the theatre manager and a small group elected by theatre employees. Theoretically this sounds like a considerable improvement over previous practice, yet at the time I was conducting my research the new policy was already encountering problems.

Immediately after Mengistu's overthrow all the theatres continued with the Eighties policy of putting on a majority of foreign translations intermingled with safe old Ethiopian favourites. Versions of *Caligula*, *Thérèse Raquin* and even Agatha Christie's *Mousetrap* were all in performance in 1992/93.

A sign of welcome new outside cooperation was a ponderous but much-hyped production of Lessing's *Nathan the Wise* mounted at the Ager Fikir with local actors, but directed, designed and funded by Germans. Indigenous productions have favoured the comedies of Mengistu Lemma and Fisseha Beley. Several leading figures I spoke to bemoaned the lack of new plays addressing the issues of contemporary Ethiopian reality. However, given experience of the Dergue and the enormous suspicion of the new government, it is hardly surprising that playwrights are extremely wary of engaging with contemporary politics. There have been a few *kinet* singers who have produced songs celebrating the new régime, but the first overtly political play was a piece submitted by Tsegaye Gebre-Medhin to the National Theatre in 1992.

This new play was called *Ha Hu Wayim Pa Pu* (From ABC to XYZ) and obviously links with *Ha Hu Ba Sidist Wore*, the play Tsegaye wrote immediately after the fall of Haile Selassie. In this piece Tsegaye stakes his claim to be considered once more a leading revolutionary writer, only this time he damns the Marxist government as comprehensively as the earlier play sought to laud it. The protagonist of the new play is the son of *Ha Hu*'s soldier-hero, and is a fighter with the EPRDF. His adventures expose, in agit-prop, living-theatre mode, the corruption of the previous state. Indeed, in an effort to be up-to-the-minute, Tsegaye added bits about the approaching regional elections while the play was in rehearsal.

Although *Pa Pu* contains a number of illusions in *qene* mode which have been widely interpreted as critical of the EPRDF, the overall tone of the play is laudatory in the extreme. The Ministry of Culture, therefore, in direct contravention of its declared policy of promoting artistic autonomy, ordered Manyazawel Endeshaw to find a space

for the work in the National's programme. What is more, the play was not to be acted by professionals, but by a group of amateurs who had been working with a theatre graduate, Tesfaye Simma. Tesfaye was to take a major role, whilst Tsegaye Gebre-Medhin directed.

Manyazawel objected to the piece primarily on artistic grounds, although he was understandably annoyed at being ordered to mount the play. *Pa Pu* was allowed to go into rehearsal but Manyazawel insisted that the work should be evaluated by the National Theatre before being allowed to go on. Eventually Ministry officials and theatre staff did evaluate the play, but their conclusions were contradictory. When Manyazawel still refused to find a place in the schedule for Tsegaye's play he was suspended on full pay. Even being able to argue with the state without summary dismissal is an improvement on previous régimes. However, eventually the theatre manager did concede to Ministry pressure. He was reinstated, and *Pa Pu* went into performance. Many of the intelligentsia and some newspapers have been critical of the piece, claiming that it is unsubtle and that Tsegaye has lost his poetic command of language. Certainly the performance I saw featured all the blatant posturing and over-acting so beloved of much Ethiopian theatre. However, the play has been a popular success. I am told this is not only because it castigates the old régime but, importantly, because of the fun it pokes at the EPRDF. As a footnote to this whole saga it is worth mentioning that the new government is itself obviously ambiguous about Tsegaye. His play has been promoted, but the playwright has been retired from his position as advisor to the Ministry of Culture.

It is unclear at the time of writing how much autonomy the professional theatres will be able to claim in the future. It is also uncertain whether the new managers will be able to significantly change established working practices or promote either relevant new indigenous plays or more challenging scripts from abroad. Raising artistic standards and promoting new forms of theatre are the prime concerns of such as Manyazawel and Jemanesh, but they confront a body of mostly apathetic actors, an audience now used to coming to the theatre for escapist entertainment, and a Ministry which makes progressive statements but then contradicts itself when political considerations become involved.

Elsewhere in the official arts world, there have been a few new developments. The despondency produced by the final years of the Mengistu regime, and the uncertainties of the present, have not been productive of dynamism in the official sphere. The most vibrant area in contemporary Ethiopian theatre seems to lie with the new "amateur" companies. A whole host of new, unofficial groups have sprung up in Ethiopia since 1991. Most of these are made up of urban youth who were previously involved in school or REYA *kinet* and theatre groups. Now that there is much less control over what is said and where theatre can be performed, and given the massive problem of urban unemployment, these groups have started performing

in any hall they can find, charging small fees in an effort to make at least a little money. The groups put on a mixture of popular plays and pieces devised on the basis of local problems. Under the Amateur Arts Programme there has been some response to these new companies, many of which long for training programmes. Ministry staff such as Tesfaye Simma, mentioned above, have run acting-classes of a few months' duration, but these cannot cater for the needs of the mass of new enthusiasts. Several of the officially amateur companies make great claims that they can rival the professionals in skill and popularity. The professionals are very dubious of such claims, but at every level, from the Ministry down, the theatre-world is aware that the amateur groups are a new force which is demanding a place on the Ethiopian theatre-scene.

There is still little knowledge of, or interest in, creating a truly popular theatre movement in Ethiopia, and the divide between traditional performance arts and drama remains rigidly in place. Yet of the countries I have considered it is in Ethiopia that the state maintains the largest commitment to the funding of theatre. In urban areas at least, drama has won an accepted place as part of Ethiopian cultural life in a manner which is paralleled in neither Tanzania nor Zimbabwe. The question now is whether that drama can become more than merely an escapist entertainment form or a source of government propaganda.

ZIMBABWE

A problem of credibility

By 1990 Robert Mugabe's Unity Government was suffering from a major loss of credibility. As early as 1984, G.H. Musengezi's play *The Honourable M.P.* had pointed the finger at ministerial corruption, a theme reiterated in Cont Mhlanga's *Workshop Negative* in 1987. However, it was in 1988 that the *Bulawayo Chronicle* exposed what came to be known as the Willowvale Motor Scandal, which implicated several prominent government figures who had used their positions to obtain scarce new vehicles at low prices and then re-sold them for large profits. The scandal led to the suicide of a *chimurenga* hero, Maurice Nyagumbo, then Senior Minister for Political Affairs, and to allegations that M.P.s commonly set themselves above the law. The Leadership Code, which was supposed to prevent government officials from accruing personal wealth, was widely seen as a sham, and in April 1989 Robert Mugabe said in parliament that

we must now admit that we are reaping the bitter fruits of our unwholesome and negative behaviour. Our image as leaders of the Party and Government has never been so

badly tarnished. Our people are crying for our blood and they certainly are entitled to do so after watching our actions and conduct over the nine years of our government.⁶²

Although the united ZANU (PF) party claimed a membership of over a million,⁶³ after 1988 there was a marked drop in the massive numbers who had previously turned out for party rallies and election campaigns. Not only were the people disillusioned about their leaders' honesty, but price rises, growing unemployment and severe shortages of transport and accommodation exacerbated government unpopularity.

Even though Mugabe was prepared to admit a measure of government culpability for Zimbabwean problems, he took less kindly to outside criticism. When the M.P. Edgar Tekere broke with ZANU in 1988 to set up the rival Zimbabwe Unity Movement (ZUM), Mugabe reacted by calling for a legislated one-party state. In other areas, too, the government has moved to limit free expression. In July 1989 students at the University of Zimbabwe boycotted classes when the police forbade demonstrations against ZANU policies. Political meetings on campus were repeatedly broken up and, on October 4, the University, where many students had voiced support for ZUM, was closed until after the 1990 elections. Interestingly, in the realm of the arts, censorship has not been invoked. Instead, the state appears to have sought to marginalise dissident voices by ignoring them.

1990 was a significant year for independent Zimbabwe. The provisions of the Lancaster House agreement, which protected white interests, came to an end. Elections were held for the first time on a purely one-person-one-vote basis. In spite of Mugabe's conciliatory policies towards the white minority, deep-seated distrust of black government denied ZANU any chance of a significant share of the white vote. ZANU won the election easily, largely because of black loyalties to the liberation leadership and owing to the lack of a viable opposition, but polling numbers were well down on previous elections.

Zimbabwe faces complex problems. As a Front-Line state, the country was committed to working for the destruction of apartheid in South Africa, but it is heavily dependent on the South African economy. Tensions between white and black remain, based on the continuing gulf in living standards between the races, although a black middle class has emerged in the past ten years to complicate race/class issues. Some seventy-five percent of Zimbabweans are still rural-based, and many are land-hungry. Universal education has raised expectations amongst youth, but there are few jobs available. Moreover, Zimbabwe continues to operate as a capitalist state while Mugabe declaims what increasingly sounds like outdated Marxist rhetoric. In spite of finally doing away with the twenty-five-year-old State

⁶² Robert Mugabe, quoted in *Hansard*, July 11, 1989.

⁶³ The population of Zimbabwe is around nine and a half million at the time of writing.

of Emergency in 1990, devolution of power is not on the President's agenda in any shape or form, and he has given ample proof that he is prepared to use the full force of the state to crush any opposition which threatens ZANU rule.

State attitudes to the performing arts

The state has been slow to address the question of artistic reorganisation. Although the National Arts Foundation admitted black arts groups to its membership from the early Eighties, it took until 1987 before it was reconstituted as the National Arts Council. This was achieved by an act of parliament which required a network of voluntary provincial and district sub-councils serviced by professional cultural officers, all of which aimed to make the Council responsive to artistic need at all levels. It was also in 1987 that the Council acquired a black director. Dr Tafataona Mahoso is a passionate advocate of positive action to rid Zimbabwe of Western cultural imperialism, but he recognises that his power is limited because of lack of money and owing to the fact that the government frequently treat the Arts Council as a mere subsidiary of the Division of Culture, ignoring its status as an independent parastatal organisation. Moreover, artists themselves are doubtful about the value of the Council, which consumes scarce artistic funding for administrative purposes and in many cases simply duplicates the work of the Division of Culture.⁶⁴

In spite of pressure from such bodies as the National Arts Council and certain members of the Division of Culture, the government has so far resisted drawing up a cultural policy. This has allowed it to continue its piecemeal and ambivalent approach to arts promotion, which has resulted in the frustration of several key practitioners. Stephen Chifunyise, Robert McLaren and Ngugi wa Mirii have all withdrawn the bulk of their efforts from the official sphere because they felt their plans were continually being blocked. They have moved increasingly into the voluntary sector, where there is more freedom to experiment. Both Chifunyise and McLaren, as well as several other interviewees, told me that they regretted the necessity for this move, as they were ideologically committed to supporting Mugabe's socialist state, but only so long as artists were allowed freedom of expression. While the government has not resorted to censorship of the arts, its disappointment with artists' failure to offer uncritical support has been manifested in a reluctance to become involved in new performance initiatives. The idea that the state is now deliberately playing down the role of the arts is not my own but was suggested to me by several interviewees.⁶⁵ Given the fact that in recent years the Tanzanian government has

⁶⁴ In 1990 the National Arts Council had a budget of Zimbabwean \$1,000,000 (approximately £20,000).

⁶⁵ Interviews with Stephen Chifunyise and Robert McLaren, October 1990 and September 1990 respectively.

adopted a similar strategy, it seems important to look at whether the arts in these countries are really viewed as an irrelevance, or whether the state sees them as a threat best combated by behaving as though art has no significant role to play in the political or developmental process.

The matter of priorities is always going to be raised when examining state attitudes to the arts. In poor countries there is a valid argument for scarce resources being channelled primarily to serve such basic needs as investment for economic growth and for services such as education, transport and accommodation. Even in developed nations, the case for state funding of the arts is contentious, because artistic work cannot be fitted into the capitalist model, which seeks to allot a precise monetary value to all activities. Moreover, judgements of what is good in art will always be subjective. To legislate for the kind of art a state may wish to promote will inevitably give rise to considerable limitations in freedom of expression and is likely to result in the state being seen, to a greater or lesser degree, as repressive.

While a totalitarian state may not mind acknowledging that it seeks to control artistic expression, countries like Tanzania and Zimbabwe, which claim to be popular, albeit one-party, democracies, risk losing credibility if they are accused of cultural repression. In the run-up to independence, and then in its immediate aftermath, popular cultures were promoted because they served nationalist aims. However, once an independent government is established it becomes a legitimate target for artistic criticism in just the same way as was the previous colonial state. This is the point that governments in both Tanzania and Zimbabwe have been reluctant to concede. They both have a tendency to view criticism as subversive and a danger to hard-won national unity. However, after using culture as a tool in independence struggles, and making public statements about the importance of culture to the national identity, leaders of independent states cannot make an obvious *volte-face* as soon as they come under artistic attack. If such governments cannot convince the populace that critical art is subversive, and will not accept the validity of public debate through culture, their options are limited.

I think it is probable that the majority of officials genuinely feel the arts are unimportant; their education under the colonial system taught them to think in this way. Colonial education alienated people from traditional cultures, while even the Western culture propagated in schools was only ever seen as peripheral to a "modern" education and was used primarily for the purposes of control and indoctrination. Colonial systems could never afford to allow the arts to be used as a medium for discussion, while in independence struggles culture was harnessed almost exclusively to nationalist aims. Therefore, once independence is achieved, leaders of one-party states are likely to see the only serious role for the arts as equivalent to that of political cheerleaders. The idea that this chorus might then turn

on the home team and point out its flaws conflicts with the role of supporters from the sidelines which the state has allotted to its artists.

In such a case, when confronted with a growing movement of popular critical art, the governments of Tanzania and Zimbabwe have responded by protesting that they lack funds and by seeking to starve such culture out of existence. In Tanzania this strategy has been largely successful because critical art had only ever been engaged in by a small élite. In Zimbabwe the movement had greater strength at grass-roots level because of the cultural conscientisation process of the *chimurenga* struggle. Therefore, except when forced to take notice of an artistic event because of the publicity and debate it has occasioned, the state has taken the starvation-tactic one step further and has chosen to ignore the critical arts. Presumably it hopes by this move both to avoid the label of oppressor and to prove to the populace that such campaigning culture is as irrelevant to society as the government would wish it to be.

As in Ethiopia and Tanzania, the Zimbabwean government continues to pay lip-service to the importance of culture and to back a limited number of artistic events. The Ministry of Culture has maintained links with the ZIMFEP/ZACT community-based theatre movement, and a variety of government agencies have funded development theatre projects by ZACT groups. The state also values the performance arts in their role of cultural ambassador. It has therefore funded not only "airport culture" events, but has also contributed significantly to productions such as Izibuko/Zambuko's *Mandela*,⁶⁶ which toured widely throughout Zimbabwe demonstrating solidarity with the ANC liberation cause. The state has supported a number of major cultural functions for national celebrations. In 1987 the official Independence Cultural Gala production, *Ministry Policy*, organised by ZIMFEP but backed by the Ministry of Culture, openly criticised corrupt officials in its political satire on tribalism, nepotism and the burning issue of unemployment, although the play also supported the President's calls for patriotism and reconciliation. *Ministry Policy* involved over fifty performers from several theatre groups, and the same style of play was repeated the following year when the production included actors from twelve ZACT companies. However, for the 1990 independence celebrations the government imported Western ballet-dancers to train local performers for a production which not only concentrated on spectacle rather than content, but also used the totally alien form of ballet to celebrate the nationalist achievement of liberation. Such a move must be seen as an official denial of the considerable achievements of Zimbabwean performing arts over the previous ten years.

Zimbabwe has actively sought the prestige of hosting international artistic events. Robert Mugabe came to open the 1990 Women in Theatre conference,

⁶⁶ *Mandela* was cooperatively devised by Izibuko/Zambuko in 1990.

which attracted delegates from many African nations, as well as from Europe and the Caribbean. On a larger scale, cultural officials lobbied successfully to become the host nation for the African Centre for the Training of Performing Arts (ACTPA) which was launched in September 1990 in Bulawayo. The Centre was the brainchild of the Union of African Performing Artists (UAPA), and was intended to be the first institution where African performance artists from across the continent could be brought together to share skills and training opportunities. Numerous agencies, headed by UNESCO, committed themselves to generous funding of the Centre, but its brief history was blighted by apparent administrative bungling and corruption. The Mauritanian project-manager, Danial Labonne, was accused from the outset of being secretive about both finances and curriculum policy, while selection-procedures for choosing course participants were chaotic and gave rise to resentment amongst local artists, who complained that they were being "elbowed out." By early 1991 many voices, including those of the UAPA Secretary General, the ZACT executive and the head of the Zimbabwean National Arts Council, Dr Mahoso, were expressing deep concern about ACTPA mismanagement. For his trouble, Dr Mahoso was dismissed from the Arts Council "pending investigation." Meanwhile a second chaotic workshop programme was begun in April 1991. Artists were underfunded, criteria for selection remained unclear, and even workshop aims were shrouded in mystery. Soon after the débâcle, Labonne disappeared (according to many, with large amounts of ACTPA hard currency), and the Centre has subsequently been forced to close, to the considerable anger of those involved in the original plans, and to the deep embarrassment of the Zimbabwean Ministry of Culture.

Throughout the independence period the government seems to have been unable to make up its mind about a funding policy towards the arts – except that the funds allotted would be minimal. Even after reorganising the National Arts Council as the official funding body (which is also commissioned to raise money from outside sources), the Ministry of Culture still plays a sporadic role as patron of prestigious arts events. However, for the most part the ZANU government has continued with Ian Smith's policy towards arts funding. That is, money for cultural initiatives should be sought primarily from independent sources. The continuation of this policy is interesting because it confirms patterns to be found in Ethiopia and Tanzania, where revolutionary and independent governments failed to overhaul to a significant degree state attitudes to the arts inherited from the régimes they succeeded. In Ethiopia the state maintained its role of patron and censor of all theatre, while in Tanzania the minimalist colonial concern with the arts continued, with only a small expansion of the colonially introduced competitive arts festivals. The fact that none of these nations has significantly altered the way in which the state backs culture not only suggests a lack of imagination but also indicates that independent governments

are as concerned to control the arts as were their predecessors. Moreover, it would appear that, although the rulers of these states may have won flag independence, they not only continue to suffer from economic dependency, but have also signally failed to decolonise their minds.

Funding the theatres

In the absence of significant state funding for the performance arts, it is important to look at where the money has come from for the burgeoning of popular theatre in Zimbabwe since the latter part of the Eighties. Except in the minority area of white theatre, revenue has not come primarily from audiences. Several theatre practitioners pointed out to me that although Zimbabweans have become used to the commercialisation of an indigenous pop music culture – and leading groups such as Thomas Mapfumo and his “Blacks Unlimited,” “The Real Sounds of Africa” and “The Bundu Boys” are immensely popular – paying to go to the theatre is still not an accepted part of urban life. Interestingly, Chris Chisro of Harare Council Youth Services told me that he felt theatre was more popular in rural than urban areas.⁶⁷ I have not enough evidence to verify this statement, which would go against the trend in Ethiopia and Tanzania, but apart from the fact that rural people have limited entertainment outlets and so might be more likely to attend a theatre performance, Chisro’s contention would fit in with the fact that in Zimbabwe theatre was introduced to the peasantry as part of the liberation struggle. The development of the community theatre movement is therefore, for rural people, an extension of a consciousness-raising art-form with which they had already learnt to identify during the war-time *pungwes*, as well as a means of building on the traditional performance arts which remained alive, during the colonial period, only in rural areas. However, before independence drama in urban areas was identified with colonial rule, and changing perceptions of drama as an élitist form have caused difficulties in the towns. The University now regularly hosts drama events, both by students and touring companies – in 1987, for example, there were seventeen plays shown on campus, and performances regularly attract audiences of several hundred. However, in Harare it is difficult to find either a venue or an audience.

I have already discussed how the culture of neo-imperialism has diverted potential audiences to irrelevant films and television which promote a capitalist, often violent set of values. In his paper, *Community Arts and the Question of Culture in the City of Harare*, Ngugi wa Mirii discusses the reluctance of the City Council to reconsider its policy of showing commercial films four days a week in the eleven council-run public halls. He also argues that theatre has failed to attract mass urban audi-

⁶⁷ Interview with Chris Chisro, Head of Youth Services, Harare City Council, Harare, September 1990.

ences: "We have not integrated the working class culture in our art."⁶⁸ Just what that culture might be is not explained, but Robert Kavanagh further discusses the practical problems of theatre in working-class environments in his article "Theatre for Development in Zimbabwe."⁶⁹ The paper looks at a joint initiative of the university students and women food-sellers at the Matapi hostels, a very poor area in the high-density suburb of Mbare, where families live in squalor in hostels originally intended as accommodation only for single men.

The women wanted to produce a play which they could use to bring attention to their appalling living conditions, in the hope that both the community and the council would work for improvements. Women and students improvised their play together, discussing problems of drunkenness, wife-beating, over-crowding and lack of privacy. Planned public rehearsals proved impossible because of disruption from passers-by, and the first performance was nearly drowned out by the noise of unruly children. A second performance, to which officials were invited, went better when the children were partly diverted (ironically, by a film show), but a planned discussion after the play turned into a speech-making forum for visiting dignitaries. As a result of the play, some repairs were undertaken at the hostels. However, such cosmetic improvements by no means address the deep-seated economic problems of the area. Discussion between students and women involved in the play led both groups to start questioning the fundamental value of a theatre-for-development model which looks at effects rather than causes. Both groups were increasingly led to see the system which allows a Matapi-type situation to occur as fundamentally flawed, but the state will only encourage drama work as long as it stays firmly within a developmental-theatre context. McLaren says that there were

strong warnings issued by the M.P. and the City Councillor at the second performance that the students should not incite the people against the government. Thus they expressed their appreciation that the students were concerning themselves with the problems of the people and participating in their development, but a fear that they might try and do this out of the context of party and government programmes and policies.⁷⁰

It would appear that urban community theatre work is required to walk a tight-rope between consciousness-raising and the political requirements of the authorities – that the people should not look too far into the causes of their problems when this might lead to a questioning of the essential benevolence of the state.

The Matapi play was shown for no charge. However, in an effort to support the core group of women food-sellers, students have subsequently been taking produc-

⁶⁸ Ngugi wa Mirii, *Community Arts and the Question of Culture*, 9.

⁶⁹ Robert Kavanagh, "Theatre for Development in Zimbabwe," in *Journal of Southern African Studies* 16.2 (Oxford, June 1990): 340–51.

⁷⁰ Robert Kavanagh, *Theatre for Development*, 347.

tions to Mbare in an effort to raise money for the women. Although charges are low, at fifty cents a ticket (approximately ten pence sterling at 1990 rates of exchange), audiences for such performances have been very small.⁷¹ The idea of attending a play seems not to have entered the urban working-class consciousness. Audiences will pay for the escapism of a film or a football match, whereas they will not consider doing the same for a piece of serious theatre.

The vast bulk of Zimbabwe's over two hundred community-based theatre groups are purely amateur. They often contribute to costs themselves, solicit a little help from such organisations as ZIMFEP or the NTO, and beg or borrow essentials like transport, props and costumes. Where entry is charged, ticket prices will be low, simply aiming to cover costs, but experience proves that even such charges will keep audiences away from all but the most prestigious companies. By 1990 fifteen full-time groups were affiliated to ZACT. For the most part these companies are made up of young school-leavers who live at home and are still dependent on their relations. Although they work full-time on theatre projects, few if any of these groups expect to earn enough to live from their drama. Aid agencies and other non-governmental organisations have sponsored the production of some plays, as have bodies like the Ministry of Health. Development-oriented theatre is what the state approves of, and in recent years it is this theatre that has become the backbone of most of the full-time theatre groups which have been emerging in Zimbabwe. As Chifunyise explains,

since 1986, more than 23 full-time theatre groups have been established nationwide. A significant dimension of this development is that these theatre groups collaborate with government agencies in creating campaigning theatre in literacy, family planning, child survival and development, environmental protection, cooperative education, immunization and most recently Aids awareness. There is no doubt therefore that this theatre for development has become the backbone of a progressive cultural development that has been a phenomenon of our ten years of independence.⁷²

What Chifunyise does not explain here is that amateur and semi-professional groups have produced much more diverse drama. The full-time groups have tended to be pushed into theatre for development, because this is the type of production for which government and development agencies will provide sponsorship, and because to perform in schools, the basis of income-provision for many groups, productions

⁷¹ I attended a weekend performance in September 1990 of a student production of Matsemela Manaka's *Egoli*, at the council-owned Stodart Hall in Mbare. The play was performed as a fund-raising exercise on behalf of the Matapi hostels women. Tickets were only fifty cents but there were fewer than fifty people in the audience.

⁷² Stephen Chifunyise, "Background on Theatre Development in Zimbabwe," unpublished paper, from a statement delivered at the opening of the "Women in Theatre Workshop" on 19 January, 1990, at the University of Zimbabwe: 4.

must have official approval. Many professional companies have therefore become adept at self-censorship in order to ensure their own survival.

Groups which do not practice developmental theatre are still encouraged to deal with local rather than national issues. The official idea is that through self-criticism of a community limited realistic change can be effected, while exploring national political issues may be impractical and disruptive. Chifunyise again:

The concept [of community theatre] as we are using it here in Zimbabwe simply means theatre being produced by individuals within their community, and that theatre addressing issues or cultural interests or aspects of that particular community predominantly and then also being performed in that particular community predominantly [...] Community based theatre should contribute to the political orientation of our people, to the fight against cultural imperialism as well as to the fight against elitist cultural attitudes, so that you could say that it has a lot to do with the politicization of the masses [...] So many people see this as a political theatre, but, you see, the term political theatre is different from what you might see as political theatre abroad or in Europe, where political theatre means a group of people preoccupied very much with burning political issues. We are saying, it is a theatre that enables people to articulate their predicament in their community and to see where they can take political steps to redress the situation. Therefore, if it is critical of the establishment, it starts with being critical of its own establishment, of the local community [...] before it starts accusing or criticising the central administration or the parliament, because that would be false consciousness.⁷³

I would argue that the fallacy behind this argument is that, as Mugabe's régime has instituted a heavily centralised government, the ability of local communities to regulate their own political affairs is severely limited. So long as government retains a "top-down" approach to decision-making it is contradictory to expect community theatre to operate effectively with a purely "bottom-up" ethos.

The full-time groups nearly all rely on tours of schools. The schools generally require developmental plays, and fees are very low. In 1988 ZIMFEP-affiliated groups were charging twenty cents per head at primary schools and between thirty cents and a dollar for performances at secondary schools and colleges.⁷⁴ If one defines professional performers as those who live off their art, there are few such actors in Zimbabwe. Fees cover costs and possibly a small payment to actors for each performance, but regular wages are almost unknown.

The costs of underwriting the workshops and administration behind the massive growth of theatre in post-independence Zimbabwe have almost all been met by non-governmental sources. Moreover, most of the major funding agencies have come from outside Zimbabwe. The Ford Foundation paid for much of ZIMFEP's theatre work. The British Council and the Canadian agency, CUSO, have funded work-

⁷³ Stephen Chifunyise, quoted in Kaarsholm, *Theatre, Democracy and Cultural Struggle*, 26.

⁷⁴ Information from unpublished ZIMFEP papers.

shops and sent trainers to Zimbabwe. More recently, the Swedish aid giants, SIDA, have given approximately £35,000 for a three-year project focusing on training and promotion with the NTO, while aid from HIVOS (The Humanistic Institute for Cooperation with Developing Countries) was secured in 1990 to run a two-year administration and training programme for ZACT. The greatest coup by a single company to date occurred in late 1993, when Amakhosi Theatre Productions secured a grant of Zim \$1.4 million from Scandinavia.

The considerable amounts of money involved in these projects were a well-earned recognition of the success of the Zimbabwean theatre movement. However, as with all external funding, questions are inevitably raised about the purpose of such generosity by government agencies from countries which are, with the possible exception of Sweden, certainly not in sympathy with either the Zimbabwean government's official socialism or with the community-based theatre movement's consciousness-raising thrust. In their *Zimbabwe Theatre Report* Chifunyise and McLaren raise the possibility of whether the acceptance of such aid only maintains a neo-colonial dependency on the West.⁷⁵ The problem comes into sharper focus when one considers the productions that foreign agencies have funded to tour outside Zimbabwe.

In recent years several major productions have toured, not only throughout Zimbabwe, but also abroad. Andrew Whalley, a white liberal playwright, took his *The Nyoka Tree* (The Snake Tree), a play which examines racial tension in employee/employer relationships in Zimbabwe, to Britain in 1988. In 1990 Whalley's play about the problems of reintegrating ex-combatants into society, and the ways in which that society has betrayed the ideals of the liberation struggle, *The Rise and Shine of Comrade Fiasco*, won a "Fringe First" at the Edinburgh Festival. Cont Mhlanga took *Citizen Mind*, a play which looks at the dangers of cultural imperialism, and *Stitshal!*, which examines women's oppression, to Scandinavia and Britain in 1989 and 1990. Both plays harbour considerable criticism of Zimbabwean government policies. Indeed, nearly all the plays invited to the West (and paid for by Western agencies) have been those most critical of the state.

The issue was seen in its sharpest focus in the argument which arose over Mhlanga's 1987 play, *Workshop Negative*, a production which soured Amakhosi's relationship with the government. The state has allowed Mhlanga's work to be publicly honoured, but officials have also suggested to the playwright that he should tone down the controversial nature of many of his plays. Like *The Nyoka Tree*, *Workshop Negative* examines the issue of race in work relationships. Roy Graham is a white ex-soldier, and Zuluboy is an ex-guerrilla. Both find themselves employed in the workshop of a black M.P. who proclaims his socialism in public while practising

⁷⁵ Stephen Chifunyise & Robert Kavanagh, ed., *Zimbabwe Theatre Report*.

the grossest exploitation of those whom he employs – besides being involved in numerous corrupt business practices. *Workshop Negative* examines the tensions and contradictions of post-independence Zimbabwe in an extremely critical light. In particular, the issue of continuing racial tensions in an officially non-racial nation had never been addressed on stage before.

Workshop Negative became the cause of considerable political debate. The argument was all the more acrimonious as those taking part were unused to free discussion of theatrical values. It is unfortunate that debate about the different types of drama emerging in Zimbabwe so often appears to involve a high degree of personal acrimony; but possibly such a period is inevitable, as people who have previously been unable to express themselves artistically now seek to establish a niche in the national arts scene, sometimes at the cost of others who may be producing equally valid work in a different vein. Debate was heightened when the government announced that it was banning *Workshop Negative* from touring abroad because there were “serious flaws” in its view of the state of the nation.⁷⁶ Like most of the plays which have toured Europe, *Workshop Negative* was supported by the NTO, which had been paying the wages of Chris Hurst, the man who played the role of Roy Graham and had come from England first as an NTO adjudicator and subsequently stayed to work with Amakhosi.

The quality of these plays was not under dispute. What the government and others questioned was why it seemed to be the most critical productions that were consistently invited to go on tour to Europe. Since *Workshop Negative* the state has not tried to control further tours, probably because the move only stirred up controversy within Zimbabwe. As in other areas of the arts, ignoring critical plays has been found to be the most effective way of minimising the impact of controversial drama.

Currently the mixture of funding sources operating in Zimbabwe appear to ensure a range of types of drama. However, so long as a theatre culture is dependent on external financing there will always be questions regarding the funder's motivations and the possibility of censorship being imposed, either overtly or covertly. In the *Zimbabwe Theatre Review* McLaren and Chifunyise call for companies to work independently and with the people to build a true socialist theatre. They fail, however, to explain how this will be accomplished in the absence of a financially supportive audience base.⁷⁷



⁷⁶ Quoted from Stephen Chifunyise in the *Herald*. Article reproduced in *Zimbabwe Theatre Report*, 16.

⁷⁷ Stephen Chifunyise & Robert Kavanagh, *Zimbabwe Theatre Report*, Editorial: 2.

The independent arts

Throughout the Eighties and early Nineties, Zimbabwean theatre has continued to flourish, as have the tensions between its various branches. Nearly all this growth has been in the area of community theatre. White drama in its pre-independence mode continues to exist, but only in the larger towns of Zimbabwe. The National Theatre Organisation is supposed to assist in the development of all drama, but until 1985 NTO activities in support of black theatre were negligible. The National Theatre Festival of 1985 featured all Western-culture plays, including such irrelevancies to the Zimbabwean situation as *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* and *The Playboy of the Western World*. At the NTO-organised CABS⁷⁸ Theatre Competition of the same year, Zinyemba says, "plays that attempted to feature modern-day Zimbabwean reality were dismissed by judges."⁷⁹ Such racist policies became increasingly unacceptable, but Nicola Davies, the NTO's present administrator, told me that the major factor enforcing change was not ideological but the cutback in funding from the National Arts Foundation.⁸⁰ The monetary crisis this cutback provoked led to a major review of NTO policy and the appointment of a new director, Susan Hains.

Hains and Davies are both white women, and a major part of their work still involves servicing the requirements of white amateur theatre groups: the NTO library contains a huge collection of outdated "French's" playscripts. As a result the organisation is looked upon with great suspicion by many involved in black theatre. Indeed, ZACT refuses to allow its members to have any dealings whatsoever with the NTO, although increasingly this policy is honoured in the breach. In fact NTO and ZACT trainers do sometimes cooperate on courses, and by 1992 relations between the organisations seemed to be slowly improving. Although some distrust of the NTO is certainly racially based, there are other reasons for philosophical disagreement between the two theatre organisations. A major source of dispute lies in the kind of big events the NTO sponsors. Until recently all NTO festivals were competitive, whereas ZACT events have no such element in them. I have already discussed the divisive nature of competitions in drama, and the NTO take this to extremes by judging in such categories as set, costume, cameo roles, etc, which are far more relevant to British amateur drama than to emergent black theatre forms. When the NTO did set up an alternative festival many people saw it as a sop to community drama, and claimed that the NTO themselves viewed it as a second-rate event for those who are not good enough for the major annual competition – a view

⁷⁸ CABS stands for Central Africa Building Society, a major Zimbabwean concern which sponsored the National Theatre Competition for several years.

⁷⁹ Zinyemba, *Zimbabwean Drama*, 8.

⁸⁰ Interview with Nicola Davies, Harare, September 1990.

the NTO strongly contests. Overall, many black groups see the NTO as élitist, concerned only with a few "quality" groups rather than with mass participatory theatre.

In spite of these criticisms the NTO has promoted several new projects which include and promote black drama. Numerous workshops have been run for black playwrights and actors. The National High Schools' Theatre Festival now includes a majority of black entrants, and the non-competitive National Popular Theatre Festival is a growing event. At the same time, many of the white amateur groups have undergone a natural withering process. Since black companies have started winning prizes at the NTO annual competition, many white theatre clubs have withdrawn from participating in what used to be their main *raison d'être*. In his article on post-1980 trends in Zimbabwean theatre, Chifunyise explains that

in 1988, the non-participation in the annual festival by the most well-known and well-established white theatre clubs was a sign that these clubs resented the success of black theatre groups [...] White theatre clubs believed that [black] plays were awarded top prizes mainly because of their content and that the aspect of relevance of the content of plays overshadowed the artistic criteria for determining the best theatre productions.⁸¹

Certainly relevance has become a matter for consideration for the first time since competitive drama was introduced to the country, and the white theatre clubs appear to be quite unwilling to move towards producing plays with a non-European orientation. They therefore seem doomed to become ever more anachronistic and to appeal to a dwindling audience. From over fifty such companies in the heyday of the Smith regime, Hains now talks of a "Big Five," in Harare, Masvingo, Bulawayo, Kadoma and Mutare.⁸² All of these retain lavish theatre buildings and continue to put on predominantly light, "white" entertainments. However, the white theatre groups' claim that the NTO does not care for quality in play production is, I think, entirely wrong.

Some practitioners argue that NTO-affiliated black companies are now merely replacing the old white clubs, in that they too have come to believe winning competitions is more important than working with and for the people.⁸³ I have seen little evidence for such an extreme statement, but the NTO certainly aims to raise standards of production amongst members. They therefore lay considerable stress on training. This would seem to be an uncontentious decision – until one learns that many of the trainers employed by the NTO, like their adjudicators, are Westerners, usually Britons with no previous experience of African, let alone Zimbabwean, performance arts. This policy has been called into question for denigrating local artists

⁸¹ Stephen Chifunyise, "Trends in Zimbabwean Theatre Since 1980," in *Journal of Southern African Studies* 16.2 (Oxford, June 1990): 279.

⁸² Susan Hains, "10 Years of Zimbabwean Theatre," *Herald*, March 15, 1990.

⁸³ Chifunyise, "Trends in Zimbabwean Theatre," 279–80.

and their expertise, because of the expense of regularly importing foreigners, and for implying that what Zimbabwe needs is more European art at the very time when the country is trying to promote indigenous culture.

The question of quality is a difficult one when considering community-based theatre, and possibly African theatre in general. One first has to define quality across cultures with very different performance-arts traditions. The average Ethiopian production would seem impossibly long, wordy and over-acted to most foreign audiences, while a piece of Tanzanian *vichekesho* appears crude in the extreme to one brought up in the more restrained traditions of contemporary British drama. Certainly, throughout my research, the issue performers raised most frequently, second only to wages, was the widespread lack of training facilities. In Zimbabwe many performers in amateur groups have only been able to attend occasional workshops, each lasting a few days. These, and initial enthusiasm, sustain groups through their first few productions, but after a time companies are at a loss to know how to develop their work further. Organisations like the Bulawayo Association of Drama Groups (BADG) run self-help schemes through internal workshops whereby more experienced groups help train new members. The scheme has had some success, but Norman Takawira, the chairman of BADG, told me that insecurities among some companies made them secretive and reluctant to work openly with potential competitors.⁸⁴ Inexperienced groups are also prone to argue over leadership styles and can become discouraged by the difficulties of arranging rehearsals and developing scripts with a chronic lack of resources and little official encouragement. As a result of all these tensions, many groups have experienced a rapid turnover of participants. Women in particular are often forced to leave theatre work because of social pressure and family commitments.⁸⁵ In the last couple of years tensions have caused several groups to split, including such well-supported companies as ZIMFEP's showcase venture, "Zimbabwe Theatre Works."

ZACT has tried to address this problem by holding non-competitive festivals and getting companies to work together, as for the Independence Cultural Gala productions, as well as by running workshops. In 1987 ZACT drew up a calendar of political days to be commemorated by member groups, and these have become a

⁸⁴ Interview with Norman Takawira, Harare, September 1990.

⁸⁵ There continue to be many problems for women in Zimbabwean theatre. All the women I interviewed said they had to cope with frequent negative audience reactions to female artists, including cat-calls and abuse. This can happen even at the University, where the novelist, playwright and amateur actor Tsitsi Dangarembga refused to appear in an Izibuko/Zambuko production after she had been heckled on stage. These problems, on top of frequent family resentment towards women involving themselves in the performing arts and the difficulties of arranging child care and domestic help, mean that only the most resolute women or those with exceptionally understanding families have been able to take part in theatre work in Zimbabwe.

focus for community theatre festivals. The days selected include national events like Independence Day and Heroes Day as well as international days such as Workers' Day, United Nation's Day and World Theatre Day. The idea grew out of a Solidarity Theatre Festival organised for the Non-Aligned Movement's eighth summit meeting in Harare in 1986, at which seven groups presented plays with a liberation theme, which were subsequently performed in numerous township areas. The idea is that these plays should have real relevance to people's lives, particularly in their political aspect, and that the festivals provide a focus for community work of "an internationally accepted level."⁸⁶ ZACT stresses that community work comes first, and festivals are supposed to be a bonus rather than the substance of a group's work.

None of this gets away from the fact that standards vary tremendously within community-oriented theatre groups. The most prestigious, like Izibuko/Zambuko, University productions and Bulawayo-based companies such as Amakhosi and "The Young Warriors" have attained national standing, attracting the most experienced performers and playwrights, large audiences, and relatively generous funding. The same is true of companies like "Meridian Theatre" and "Zimbabwe Arts Productions," which have performed prize-winning plays by Andrew Whalley and Ben Sibenke respectively. The work of these companies is vibrant and exciting. A range of liberation and traditional performance arts may be incorporated into the drama along with popular music, combat skills and even excerpts from political speeches. What makes the best of the new Zimbabwean theatre so arresting is that it not only deals with contentious, topical issues in a down-to-earth manner, but that it has so few inhibitions about employing a variety of styles and performance techniques, however unconventional, to get its messages across. These leading groups also demand considerable commitment from their members, who may be required to put in many hours work, usually on a voluntary basis, outside working hours, and to observe strict disciplinary codes.⁸⁷ By contrast, the smaller groups often have problems in maintaining their membership and organising rehearsals. Hampered by lack of time, money and facilities, they also frequently suffer from a dearth of experienced performers and playwrights. Their product is therefore often crude, and groups have great difficulty in producing new plays. When I spoke to Stephen Chifunyise about this point he argued that quality was not a major concern, but that the aim was to involve communities in making plays about issues which affected them.⁸⁸ However, it does seem that these plays have less audience-appeal, and that

⁸⁶ Susan Hains, in the *Herald*; article reproduced in *Zimbabwe Theatre Report*, 9.

⁸⁷ Several groups have adopted strict codes of practice, which may include moral regulations as well as rules relating directly to theatre work. ZACT encourage such codes. I suspect that this is due to a wish to make the theatre appear respectable.

⁸⁸ Interview with Stephen Chifunyise, Bulawayo, October 1990.

actors themselves often become disillusioned and leave groups if they do not feel their work is developing over a period of time. The balance between a concern for quality which may become élitist and the desire to promote theatre for all is a difficult one to achieve. However, it would be regrettable if differences in emphasis between bodies such as ZACT and the NTO were allowed to become so extreme that the Zimbabwean community theatre movement as a whole is irreconcilably split into a series of splinter groups; many companies could suffer as a result.

The contemporary plays

A striking feature of the Zimbabwean literary scene today is the absence of literature on socialism and the contradictions that have come to the fore since independence. Some works have been produced, including the plays of Thompson Tsodzo and Gonzo Musengezi, but these are not particularly inspiring as works of art.⁸⁹

So wrote the Marxist critic Emmanuel Ngara, uncontentiously, in 1986. What is therefore amazing is how untrue this statement is of the Zimbabwean situation regarding either literature or theatre in the Nineties. In the international arena Zimbabwean novelists won the Commonwealth Prize for Literature in 1989 and 1990, while in 1989 Chenjerai Hove won the Noma award for African Literature for his novel *Bones*.⁹⁰ All the works concerned have a strong political content. In the area of drama, as elsewhere in Africa, relatively few plays have been published, although the number is large in comparison with either Ethiopia or Tanzania. Moreover, plays either published or performed continue to get little publicity, both because of dismissive government attitudes and because the major newspapers seldom send critics to black theatre events. Indeed, the theatre critics on the newspapers are whites who started work under the Smith régime and who still appear to see their job as that of offering bland support to the white theatre establishment. Many of the scripts I am considering I have seen only in manuscript or on stage. However, an interesting development in play-publishing originated with Robert McLaren in 1986. Devised plays are the least likely to be printed, as publishers are used to dealing, not with a group of theatre workers, but with individual writers. McLaren argues that this approach is unsuited to community theatre, where the writer is only part of an integrated unit of actors and producers who make their play together.⁹¹ In an effort to change the image of play-publishing, he therefore started the series of "University Playscripts" in order to print university-originated devised works. To date, only

⁸⁹ Emmanuel Ngara, "National Liberation and Social Reconstruction."

⁹⁰ The Commonwealth Prize Winners were, in 1989, Tsitsi Dangarembga for *Nervous Conditions* (Harare: Zimbabwe Publishing House, 1989) and, in 1990, Shimmer Chinodya for *Harvest of Thorns* (Harare, 1989). Chenjerai Hove won the Noma Award for his *Bones* (Harare, 1988).

⁹¹ See *Zimbabwe Theatre Report*, 43.

Mavambo and *Katshaa!* have been published. The venture has been unable to produce any new scripts since 1988 owing to the withdrawal of support by the University authorities. However, the idea, if it could be developed, points a way to a new kind of publishing aimed at practical theatre workers.

Even when one takes into consideration the limitations of conventional publishing, there has been a considerable boom in the printing of plays in Zimbabwe in the latter part of the Eighties. Moreover, for the first time published plays have started to address current controversial issues openly. Tsodzo's *Shanduko* (The Reply), published in 1983, was the first play to be frankly critical of the new political establishment.⁹² As in his previous plays, the tone in *Shanduko* is heavily moral and the forces of good and evil are clearly divided. The ironically named Wisdom Tafirenyika is the focus of evil in the play. Wisdom is a government functionary responsible for ensuring workers' welfare, and in many respects he is the forerunner of a series of corrupt government officials who have appeared in recent Zimbabwean drama. Like the corrupt M.P. Mkhize in *Workshop Negative*, Wisdom makes socialist speeches for public consumption but is really only interested in furthering his own interests. Nepotism is a common target in contemporary drama. In *Shanduko* we see that the only worker seeking help whom Wisdom is prepared to assist is his relative, Grace. Prostitution and casual abuse of women are issues in Gonzo Musengezi's play *The Honourable M.P.*, and in *Shanduko* the matter is also raised when we learn that the villain's most profitable concern is a brothel. However, evil is never allowed to triumph in Tsodzo's plays. Our hero is the naive and notably teetotal Tapiwa, who initially seeks Wisdom's help, without success, but who finally wins revenge and justice when he exposes the brothel owner and sees him imprisoned.

The lack of subtlety in *Shanduko* is reminiscent of some of the Tanzanian political plays of the Seventies. So is the fact that Tsodzo refrains from implicating the wider political establishment in his accusations of government hypocrisy and malpractice. Wisdom Tafirenyika is only a minor official who works alone. The end of *Shanduko* reaffirms a strong faith in government policies, and urges the people to trust in politicians, the police, the workers and the youth of Zimbabwe.

Gonzo Musengezi's *The Honourable M.P.* is similarly unsubtle.⁹³ The play pits M.P. Shakespeare Pfende against another incorruptible teetotaller, the teacher Choto. The extravagance of Pfende's greed for both material goods and young women is so extreme as to be deliberately ridiculous. By contrast, the sufferings of the M.P.'s neglected constituents are taken very seriously. By choosing a Member of Parliament as his protagonist, Musengezi brings his criticisms far closer to the

⁹² T.K. Tsodzo, *Shanduko* (Harare: College Press, 1983).

⁹³ G.H. Musengezi, *The Honourable M.P.* (Gweru: Mambo, 1984).

political leadership than Tsodzo had done, but his play too avoids hacking at the roots of official corruption. Pfende is an isolated figure, and the resolution of the play is highly unrealistic. In the final scene the M.P.'s constituents carry out a citizen's arrest on their betrayer and propose to set up a worker's democracy, without any reference to the existence of a national government.

By the mid-Eighties a whole spate of plays were being produced which investigated Zimbabwe's socio-political problems in rather more complex style than the work of Tsodzo and Musengezi. If the villains are still often irredeemably wicked, those they oppress are less shiningly virtuous. Few of these plays have been published. The leading writers of such drama are Cont Mhlanga and Andrew Whalley, and both men write for production, using scripts which are flexible vehicles for performance rather than works of literature. I have already discussed Mhlanga's *Nansi le Ndoda* and his *Workshop Negative*. In his other plays Mhlanga has focused on a range of issues. *Children on Fire* looks at drug abuse and its effects on children. *Isililo* (To Mourn) examines the struggle of workers and unions against the bosses. *Citizen Mind* condemns neo-colonialism in Zimbabwe, and *Stitsha!* takes a wide-ranging look at the many ways in which women are oppressed in contemporary society.⁹⁴

Andrew Whalley has similarly concerned himself with a variety of issues and, like Mhlanga, avoids the doctrinaire approach of the earlier writers who offered unrealistically easy solutions to highly complex problems. *Platform Five* and *The Nyoka Tree* won the National Theatre Festival in 1987 and 1988 respectively. *Platform Five* focuses on the disinherited, the tramps and down-and-outs who have no place in the new Zimbabwe. Their meaningless power games are contrasted with the authority of the policeman Mu, who is too stupid to wield his power to any effect, and the real control which lies in the hands of the wealthy but therefore (inevitably in the world of Zimbabwean drama) corrupt Blaze. However, what is potentially a vicious attack on capitalism and corrupt power-dealing is softened here by the absurdist style of *Platform Five*, and by Whalley's refusal to pigeonhole his characters as simply good or bad.

The Nyoka Tree is a parody of the story of the Fall of Man, in which Adam is a stereotype of the "Rhodie"⁹⁵ – racist, bigoted and reactionary. His wife is rather more complex in her alliance with Nyoka, the guerrilla-snake, and there are suggestions that the oppression of women and the evils of racism have much in common. The more recent *Chef's Breakfast*, and *The Rise and Shine of Comrade Fiasco*, continue

⁹⁴ *Children of Fire*, performed 1987; *Isililo*, performed 1987; *Citizen Mind*, performed 1989; *Stitsha!*, performed 1990.

⁹⁵ The term "Rhodie" is commonly used in Zimbabwe to describe those whites who cling to their "Rhodesian" identity. They are reactionary and racist. The men can usually be easily identified because they almost all wear short-sleeved shirts, tight blue short shorts, knee-length socks and desert boots.

Whalley's style of using absurdist comedy to level severe socio-political criticisms at the current state of Zimbabwe.

What is interesting about these writers, apart from the content of their work, is the fact that the leading Zimbabwean playwrights have been succeeding in uniting experimental Western theatre-styles and the influences of a westernised upbringing with local traditional and revolutionary forms of art in a manner I have not seen paralleled in either of the other countries I have studied. This is understandable, given the greater penetration of Western culture into Zimbabwe. It is, however, notable that some at least of Zimbabwe's playwrights, both black and white, are embracing their mixed cultural heritage in a positive manner rather than following the Tanzanian path and seeking what may be an elusive African purity for their art. The results of this inclusive philosophy have had considerable success, both in the printed form and on stage. Mhlanga incorporates karate with *ingoma* and *chimurenga* music. Andrew Whalley bases much of his work on the Western absurdist style of drama, and in *The Nyoka Tree* parodies Milton's *Paradise Lost* as well as the Bible. Yet Whalley, too, incorporates his Zimbabwean heritage. *The Nyoka Tree* uses four tongues, Ndebele, Shona, English and white Rhodie vernacular (the latter is at least a strong dialect of English, if not another language). He also incorporates *chimurenga* dance and music, not to mention several direct quotes from God – aka Ian Smith.

Whalley and Mhlanga, however, had a forerunner in the person of Dambudzo Marechera. Marechera wrote a mixture of plays, poetry and fiction. He was eccentric in the extreme, often living as a tramp in both Harare and London, insulting his friends and using large amounts of drugs and alcohol. When he died young in 1987 Marechera fulfilled the final criteria for becoming the cult-figure he is in Zimbabwe today.

Marechera's style is unlike that of any other African writer I have considered. He owes considerable debts to the absurdists and to Samuel Beckett, but his most obvious models are the *Ubu* plays of Alfred Jarry. Marechera uses no obviously African performance forms in his work, but since he is talking about a capitalist system and mores that Zimbabwe has inherited from the West, it is perhaps fitting that he employs a satiric form invented by Jarry to castigate greed in Europe early in the twentieth century. The trilogy *The Skin of Time: Plays by Buddy* was never performed in the writer's lifetime, but quickly became a cult-success when the plays were published in 1985 in a compilation of Marechera's work, *Mindblast*.⁹⁶ The short one-act plays *The Coup*, *The Gap* and *Blitzkrieg or The Toilet* take a scarifying look at the political and commercial classes, with each play focusing with increasing

⁹⁶ Dumbudzo Marechera, "The Skin of Time: Plays by Buddy," in *Mindblast* (Harare: College Press, 1985).

clarity on Zimbabwe. Marechera takes corruption almost for granted. What his anarchic and scatological humour homes in on is the insensate greed of the ruling class, coupled with what he sees as their extraordinary degree of stupidity.

For Marechera the world narrows down in the course of the trilogy from *The Coup*, which we are told could be set anywhere in the Third World, to *Blitzkrieg*, which take place in the immediate environs of a toilet in the house of the Harare business man, Norman Drake. In each play the scatological references thicken until in *Blitzkrieg* business and political deals, copulation and murder all take place either in or immediately outside the toilet. The obvious implications regarding the correlation between excreta and the Zimbabwean ruling class would be hard to miss. The playwright spares no-one. Black and white are equally culpable. Even the family unit is torn apart in *The Gap*. Here the inept Spotty Kenfield spends the entire play trying to persuade his son to bring him some castor oil for his constipation, while he negotiates between wife and mistress and prepares to blow up his house prior to fleeing to South Africa. After a running barrage of no-holds-barred family insults, the play ends with Spotty ringed with explosives, plus the bed, the bed-pan and everything else his son can find except the castor oil, since son Dick has consistently failed to understand his father's instructions. In Marechera's world only sex, money and excreta communicate. Zimbabwe is falling apart – not, as Spotty thinks, because of the new order, but because the new order is as bad as the old.

Underneath his humour, the playwright's voice is desperately serious. Dick is a profoundly unpleasant child, but he is the product of his upbringing, and into his mouth Marechera puts a plea for the future:

DICK You people, you think just of yourselves. You have all these psychotic adulteries and paranoid politics and high divorce rates but have you ever THOUGHT about what that's doing to us YOUR CHILDREN (Pause) Look at him – childishly clinging to his tart and his grenade. Who is the more child here?... (Quietly) Dad, answer me. Do you ever really think about thinking?

SPOTTY This is not Europe, Dick. This is Africa.

DICK There's no place for thought in Africa?

SPOTTY There isn't, if you want to get things done.⁹⁷

Ultimately Marechera seems to be seeking simply a world of humanitarian consideration. However, since his dream appears unattainable, he allows himself and his play-world to fall into anarchy. The oriental Shogun, as a clear-sighted outsider, passes the final judgement of the trilogy when he states: "Toilet make joke on whole country."⁹⁸

⁹⁷ Dambudzo Marechera, *The Coup* in *Mindblast*, 25.

⁹⁸ Dambudzo Marechera, *Blitzkrieg or The Toilet*, in *Mindblast*, 42.

The final play I wish to consider in the category of scripts fundamentally critical of the state and its capitalist allegiances is George Mujajati's *The Wretched Ones*, winner of the Play of the Year Award in 1988.⁹⁹ Unlike most of the other works I have considered, *The Wretched Ones* looks not at corrupt politicians but at the evils of capitalism, especially at the responsibility of big business for the gross inequality of wealth in the Third World. Because this play is not explicitly set in Zimbabwe, and because it attacks the capitalist ethos, it has been actively promoted as a schools text by the Ministry of Education. However, *The Wretched Ones* is a clear indictment of the way the Zimbabwean economy is developing. The play works on two levels. Initially we see how the immensely rich Mr Buffalo oppresses the poor and deepens their misery by his merciless grasping at ever more wealth. At the same time, there is a play within the main play. Buffalo's son, Daniel, is in revolt against the system his father represents and is writing a play, which his father reads with mounting horror. In this play, the Zimbabwean problems of unemployment and corruption in the allocation of scarce jobs are shown developing to such an extreme that jobs are auctioned. Businessmen buy up the scarce posts and then allocate them to desperate workers for a fraction of their real value. This play ends with the people rising against their exploiters, but while Mujajati might favour such a resolution to the problems of the poor he is not as unrealistic as Tsodzo and Musengezi. In *The Wretched Ones*, hope lies in the youth and unity of the poor; but it is a faint hope. In the outer play, Mr Buffalo's corrupt power flourishes. With the help of the police he orders the demolition of a squatter camp on his land, and as a result we see families broken apart and dying. The play climaxes when the desperate Lazarus puts out his own eyes because

I was tired of seeing. I was tired of seeing a world full of riches, luxuries and plenty. For me they do not really exist [...] They told me lies. they told me lies of sweet things which I will never enjoy [...] I would rather see this darkness, because I own nothing more than darkness.¹⁰⁰

At the University, Robert McLaren is quite as anti-capitalist as Mujajati, but his Marxism requires that the bulk of Faculty of Arts Drama and Izibuko/Zambuko productions take a positivist look at how socialism will, eventually, triumph. The University has been responsible for adaptations of foreign socialist plays such as Ngugi wa Mirii and Ngugi wa Thiongo's *I Will Marry When I Want*, Rugyendo's *The Contest* and Nikolai Pogodin's *Kremlin Chimes*, but many more pieces have been collectively devised.

Mavambo traced the history of Zimbabwean colonisation and the struggle for liberation. *Katshaa!* and *Mandela* performed a similar task for South Africa, and

⁹⁹ George Mujajati, *The Wretched Ones* (Harare: Longman, 1989).

¹⁰⁰ George Mujajati, *The Wretched Ones*, Act 3, scene vii: 36.

Samora Continua for Mozambique.¹⁰¹ The dominant technique has been to use a big cast and a series of brief scenes illustrative of stages in the struggle, with the whole tied together by rousing revolutionary music and dance-sequences. Although the formula is simple, and possibly even simplistic in its assumption that the people will always overcome oppression, the liberation plays have been powerfully and professionally mounted and have won popular support throughout the country on their widespread tours. I am slightly more doubtful about how a fundamentalist Marxist ethos works when drama is required to deal with more controversial issues than national liberation. In *The Adamant Eve*, which I saw in 1985, student research into the oppression of women resulted in an evocative play with actors speaking of women's problems with sexist partners, harassing employers, and the responsibilities of running families singlehandedly. However, the ending, which calls for women to join the national women's organisation in order to defeat their oppression, and sees this as a panacea for all ills, is a grossly simplistic response to a complex problem. It also seems to be a response dictated by political dogma rather than one arising naturally out of the experience of the play. University drama has been a major force in the development of popular theatre in Zimbabwe, and has resulted in some highly polished, powerful plays, but the dominance of Robert McLaren and his political perspective does limit the themes treated, and has led to a particular style of performance which may in the long run become somewhat simplistically repetitive. As the elected choice of a committed socialist company like Izibuko/Zambuko, such a singleminded policy may be perfectly acceptable; as a strategy for developing the whole of University drama, it is rather more open to question.

In recent years the authorities have moved against McLaren's work, not expressly because of his Marxism, but more in a spirit of protectionism against his open-door attitudes towards theatre work. In 1987 the University authorities, concerned to protect their élite status and to avoid contentious theatre, cut funding to Izibuko/Zambuko on the grounds that it was not truly a University group. Next, outsiders were refused permission to audit theatre courses, and finally, in 1992, a formal and exclusive drama department was established. Once again, as a régime becomes more established one sees structures being increasingly imposed on the arts which are designed to be controllable by bureaucrats.

Given the large number of theatre groups operating in Zimbabwe, it is inevitable that my information on contemporary drama will not be comprehensive, especially as so many companies are producing devised works. As yet, Zimbabwe has little critical discourse taking place on the subject of contemporary drama. Even pub-

¹⁰¹ *Mavambo* (Harare: Faculty of Arts Drama, 1986); *Katshaa!* (Harare: Faculty of Arts Drama, 1988); *Mandela*, performed 1990; *Samora Continua*, performed 1988.

lished plays, especially if they are in Shona or Ndebele, receive little critical comment. Moreover, the small amount of published debate on community drama has been dominated by a very few voices. However, there are certain dominant themes in contemporary drama, besides the overtly political, which can be easily identified.

Since contemporary drama in Zimbabwe is youth-dominated, the concerns of the young are prominent. Dorras and Walker's *The Big Wide World* is a good example of plays dealing with widespread disillusionment with the post-independence education system's failure to lead to full employment.¹⁰² Mhlanga's *Nansi le ndoda* and *Stitsha!* also discuss this issue in some depth.

Sexual relations are another area which has concerned many groups and playwrights. Again Dorras and Walker have produced two plays dealing with unequal roles and expectations of marriage between the sexes, in *Is This Love?* and *She Can't Even Cook*. These plays deal with the problems of young lovers, but the "sugar daddy" is also a common figure. Willie Chigide's *Imwe Chenzi Ichebvepi* (Where Will Another Chance Come From?) looks at the common situation of a teacher seducing his female pupils, although, unusually, the seducer here is forced to pay maintenance for the resulting baby. The Bulawayo company "Iluba Elimnyama" (Black Flower) created another sugar daddy in the figure of Max in their play *Impilo-le* (Oh, this life).¹⁰³ Just how unusual it is for such men to be forced to take responsibility for their action was demonstrated by audience responses. Evie Globerman, who worked with Iluba Elimnyama from 1986 to 1988, says that when Max agreed to pay maintenance for his illegitimate child the "promise [...] was greeted with female ululations and cheers."¹⁰⁴ In contrast to such uncommon triumphs for women, Tsitsi Dangerembga's *She No Longer Weeps* takes a more sombre look at the problems of illegitimate children. Here, the heroine, Martha, is not wanted by either her lover, Freddy, or her ultra-religious family once she becomes pregnant. When she subsequently asserts herself as a successful independent mother, society still insists upon looking at her as little more than a prostitute. Then Freddy blackmails Martha into giving up her daughter, because

I want everything from you, everything. I had your virginity and your love but you tried to prove you could manage without me, so now I must teach you a lesson. You are not a good woman. You don't know your place in this world, which is underneath.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰² J. Dorras & P. Walker, *The Big Wide World* (Harare: College Press, 1987).

¹⁰³ Dorras & Walker, *Is This Love?* (Harare: College Press, 1987) and *She Can't Even Cook* (Harare: College Press, 1987); Willie Chigide, *Imwe Chenzi Ichebvepi* (Where Will Another Chance Come From?; Gweru: Mambo, 1986) and *Impilo-le* (Oh, This Life), performed 1987.

¹⁰⁴ Evie Globerman, "Backstage on the Frontline: Iluba Eluba Elimnyama; a Bulawayo Theatre Collective," in *Journal of Southern African Studies* 16.2 (Oxford, June 1990): 362.

¹⁰⁵ Tsitsi Dangerembga, *She No Longer Weeps* (Harare: College Press, 1987), Act 3, scene ii: 53.

In her despair at the loss of her daughter and the impossibility of women being allowed to live a decent life, Martha plans the public murder of Freddy before giving herself up to the mockery which is men's justice.

Dangarembga's view of the lot of women is bleak in the extreme, but the number of recent plays which confront the issue of sexism suggests that many are concerned about the role of women in Zimbabwe. Another aspiring woman, Thuli, who wants to be a playwright in Cont Mhlanga's *Stitsha!*, is also forced to resort to murder, this time of her jealous brother. *Stitsha!*, like Mhlanga's earlier *Isililo*, Vashandi Theatre's *Madzimai Pabasa* (Women at Work), and Just for Women Theatre's *Waringa* (Waringa), also looks at the pervasive nature of sexual harassment of women at work, and indeed at how women often have to give themselves sexually to potential employers in order to find work at all.¹⁰⁶ The overall view seems to be that socialist Zimbabwe has done little as yet to truly promote the equality of women.

More rural groups have focused on the issue of land resettlement, as demonstrated in Aaron Moyo's *Kuridza Ngoma Nedemo* (Beat the Drum with the Axe), and the problems of reorganising formerly white farms as cooperatives, as in Fambidzanai Theatre Group's *Tikiti Wangu Bwana* (My Job-Card, Boss).¹⁰⁷ Apart from the critical political drama and the solidarity plays discussed above, these are the main areas that contemporary indigenous theatre is currently exploring.

Zimbabwean drama is now established as a force in the discussion of both social and political questions. At the Division of Culture, the Deputy Secretary, Mr Msiwa, confirmed that theatre is now the most rapidly growing and popular form of community artistic expression, because, he said, it is the form which most directly speaks of the people's concerns. Unlike the present situation in so many other African countries, the theatre in Zimbabwe has neither been stifled by the state nor colonised by a group of literary intellectuals. In spite of internal divisions and state reluctance to support controversial drama, Zimbabwe has managed to build a dynamic theatre movement using a heterogeneous variety of traditions and styles available to participants of all backgrounds – a highly impressive achievement indeed.



¹⁰⁶ *Madzimai Pabasa* (Women at Work), devised by "Vashandi Theatre," performed 1985; *Waringa* (Waringa), devised by "Just For Women Theatre," performed 1987.

¹⁰⁷ Aaron C. Moyo, *Kuridza Ngoma Nedemo* (Beat the Drum with the Axe), Harare, 1985. Devised by Fambidzanai Theatre Group, *Tikiti Wangu Bwana* (My Job-Card Boss), performed 1986. See also Fig. 24.

ANNEX A

INFORMANTS

ETHIOPIA

<i>Name</i>	<i>Position (at the time of interview)</i>	<i>Date and Place</i>
BEKELE ABABA	Head of Theatre Division, Ministry of Culture.	October 1987, Addis Ababa.
BEKELE TAFARA	Actor and Director, National Theatre; Committee Member, Ethiopian Actors Association.	October 1987, Addis Ababa.
BELAYNEH ABUNE	Lecturer, Theatre Arts Department, Addis Ababa University.	Many talks, 1987–93.
DR BERHANU ABEBE	Head of External Affairs, Addis Ababa University.	Many talks, 1987–92.
BERHANU WOLDE-MIKAEL	Ministry of Culture Representative, Kaffa.	November 1987, Jimma.
BERHE SEYOUM	Theatre Trainer, Ministry of Culture.	December 1987, Addis Ababa.
CHANYELLO WOLDE-GIORGIS	Theatre Worker, Arsi.	December 1987, Assela.
DEBEBE ESHETU	Senior Director, Ager Fikir Theatre; Ethiopian Representative, African Union of Performing Artists; Member of National Shengo.	Many talks, 1987–90.
DEBEBE SEIFU	Lecturer, Theatre Arts Department, Addis Ababa University; playwright; Chairperson of Ethiopian Writers Association and Member of National Shengo.	November 1987, Addis Ababa.
EPHRAIM BEKELE	Theatre Trainer, Ministry of Culture.	January 1999, Yet Nora.
ESTEPHANOS ADAMSU	Theatre Worker, Gojjam.	December 1987, Bahr Dar.
GETACHEW ABDI	General Manager, National Theatre and playwright.	February 1988, Addis Ababa.
GIRMA ELIAS	Ministry of Culture, Representative, Arsi.	December 1987, Addis Ababa.

GIRMA YILMA	Minister of Culture.	December 1987, Addis Ababa.
HAYDN GEORGE	Lecturer, Foreign Languages Department, Addis Ababa University.	October 1987, Addis Ababa.
INDALLA DEMBEL	Head of Theatre, Ministry of Culture.	August 1992, Addis Ababa.
JEMANESH SOLOMON	Director and actor, City Hall Theatre.	Many talks, 1987– 93.
MANYAZAWEL ENDESHAW	General manager, National Theatre.	Many talks, 1987– 93.
MENGISTU LEMMA	Lecturer, Addis Ababa University and playwright. (Now deceased.)	November 1987, Addis Ababa.
SAHALU ASSEFA	General manager, Ras Theatre.	February 1988, Addis Ababa.
SEYOUM TEFARA	Actor, City Hall Theatre.	March 1988, Addis Ababa.
TAFARI ALEMU	Actor and director, Ager Fikir Theatre.	Many talks, 1987– 93, Addis Ababa.
TELAHUN GUGSAH	Head of Arts Division, Ministry of Culture.	November 1987, Addis Ababa.
TESFAYE GESSESSE	Chairman, Theatre Arts Department and Director of University Cultural Centre; playwright.	Many talks, 1988– 93, Addis Ababa.
TOMAS TORA	Theatre Worker, Kaffa.	November 1987, Jimma.
TSEGAYE GEBRE-MEDHIN	Advisor, Ministry of Culture, and playwright.	Many talks, 1987– 89.
YEGRAM RETTA	Head of Amateur Arts Programme, Ministry of Culture.	February 1987, Addis Ababa.
ZERABACH TEFAYE	Actor, National Theatre.	August 1992, Addis Ababa.
ZERIHUN BELET	Ministry of Culture Representative, Gojjam.	December 1987, Bahr Dar.

TANZANIA

<i>Name</i>	<i>Position (at the time of interview)</i>	<i>Date and Place</i>
MR BURAYANI	Teacher, Bagamoyo College of Arts.	May 1988, Bagamoyo.
MR GOSORI	Vice-Principal and teacher, Butimba College of Education.	October 1989, Butimba.
G.Z. KADUMA	Director of Arts and Languages, Ministry of Culture.	June 1988, Dar es Salaam.

PROF. AMANDINA LIHAMBA	Head of Department of Theatre, Art and Music, University of Dar es Salaam; playwright and director of "Paukwa" Theatre Company.	May 1988 and October 1989, Dar es Salaam.
RICHARD MABALA	Lecturer, Department of Literature, University of Dar es Salaam, and actor in "University Drama Group."	March 1990, Dar es Salaam.
DR JOSEPH MBELE	Head of Department of Literature, University of Dar es Salaam.	November 1989 and March 1990, Dar es Salaam.
DR EMMANUEL MBOGO	Playwright and Lecturer, Department of Kiswahili, University of Dar es Salaam.	May 1988, Dar es Salaam.
LOUIS MBUGHUNI	Lecturer, Department of Theatre, University of Dar es Salaam.	October 1989, Dar es Salaam.
JOEL MKUDE	Regional Arts Officer.	November 1989, Dar es Salaam.
MR MOLLEL	Ministry of Culture.	November 1989, Dar es Salaam.
MR ROBINO	Administrator, Nyumba ya Sanaa (House of Art).	June 1988, Dar es Salaam.

ZIMBABWE

<i>Name</i>	<i>Position (at the time of interview)</i>	<i>Date and Place</i>
STEPHEN CHIFUNYISE	Playwright and Theatre Practitioner.	October 1990, Bulawayo.
PRAXIDES CHIKEREMA	ZIMFEP, Head of Community Education and Theatre.	February 1990, Harare.
MARY CHIMBODZA	Actor, "Just For Women Theatre Company."	September 1990, Harare.
CHRIS CHISRO	Head of Youth Services, Harare City Council.	September 1990, Harare.
NICOLA DAVIES	Administrator, National Theatre Organisation.	September 1990, Harare.
DR KIMANI GECAU	Lecturer, Department of English, University of Zimbabwe.	September 1990, Harare.
SUSAN HAINS	Director, National Theatre Organisation.	September 1992, Harare.
ROBERT MCLAREN	Theatre Lecturer, University of Zimbabwe, founder of "Izibuko/Zambuko" Theatre Company.	Many talks, 1990–92, Harare.
DR TAFATAONA MAHOSO	Director, National Arts Council.	September 1990, Harare.

NGUGI WA MIRII	ZACT Director.	September 1992, Harare
CONT MHLANGA	Director, "Amakhosi Theatre Productions" and playwright.	October 1990, Bulawayo.
TITUS MOETSABI	Actor, "Izibuko/Zambuko" and Treasurer of the Harare ZACT Chapter.	September 1990, Harare.
MR MSIWA	Deputy Secretary to the Division of Culture.	September 1990, Harare.
ELIZABETH NCUBE	Praise-poet.	October 1992, Harare.
NORMAN TAKAWIRA	Chairman, Bulawayo Association of Drama Groups (BADG), Director of "The Young Warriors" Theatre Company.	September 1990, Harare.

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PLAYS

Ethiopia

- N.B. Where a play has not been published I have given, when I know it, the year of its first performance.
- ABE GUBEGNA. *Yepatris Lumumba Asezzan Amwamwat* (The Saddening Death of Patrice Lumumba; Addis Ababa: Berhanena Selam, 1961/62).
- . *Yedakamoch Wotimed* (The Trap of the Weak; perf. 1975).
- . *Poletikanna Poletignoch* (Politics and Politicians; perf. 1980).
- AEMIRO FEREDÉ. *Fikir Mecheresha* (Love to the End; unpublished).
- ALEMTSEHEY WEDAJO. *Ber* (The Door; perf. 1976/77).
- ASSABER GEBRE-HIWOT. *Yenegesta Azab Tarikawi Guzo* (The Historical Journey of the Queen of Sheba; Addis Ababa: Berhanena Selam, 1958/59).

- *Yekidane—Qual Theatre* (Drama of the Covenant; Addis Ababa: Berhanena Selam, 1955/56).
- ASSEGID DEMISSE. *And Amit Keand Ken* (A Year and a Day; unpublished).
- ASTELKACHEW YIHUN. *Anchin Alu* (They Called You, Girl; unpublished).
- *Yililina Tsetet* (Remorseful Conscience; unpublished).
- ATENEH ALEMU. *Zerai Deress* (Zerai Deress; Addis Ababa: Berhanena Selam, 1955/56).
- BERHANU DENG. *Nigist Saba* (The Queen of Sheba; Addis Ababa: Berhanena Selam, 1959).
- DANIACHEW WORKU. *Sow Alle Bayye* (Thinking There Is A Man; Addis Ababa: Berhanena Selam, 1957/58).
- DEBEBE SEIFU. *Kebahir Yeweta Assa* (Fish out of the Sea; unpublished).
- *Saikoatre Sitereler* (Untying the Tied Rope; unpublished).
- *Anasua Na Enesu* (She and Them; unpublished).
- FIKKERE TULUSAH. *Mekabir Kofariuma Yeressa Satin Shachu* (The Grave Digger and The Coffin Maker; unpublished).
- FISSEHA BELEY. *Simen Sintayehu* (Simen Sintayehu; perf. 1984).
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- *Alkash Na Zefegn* (The Mourner and the Singer; unpublished).
- *Ashegre Meseret* (Ashegre Meseret; unpublished).
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- *Achab* (Achab; Addis Ababa: Berhanena Selam, 1955/56).
- *Hannibal* (Hannibal; Addis Ababa: Berhanena Selam, 1955/56).
- *Yeketat Maeбал* (The Storm of Retribution; Addis Ababa: Berhanena Selam, 1948/49).
- MAKONNEN ENDALKACHEW. *Dawitna Orion* (David and Orion; Addis Ababa: Berhanena Selam, 1954/55).
- *Selaswi Dawit* (King David III; Addis Ababa: Berhanena Selam, 1955).
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